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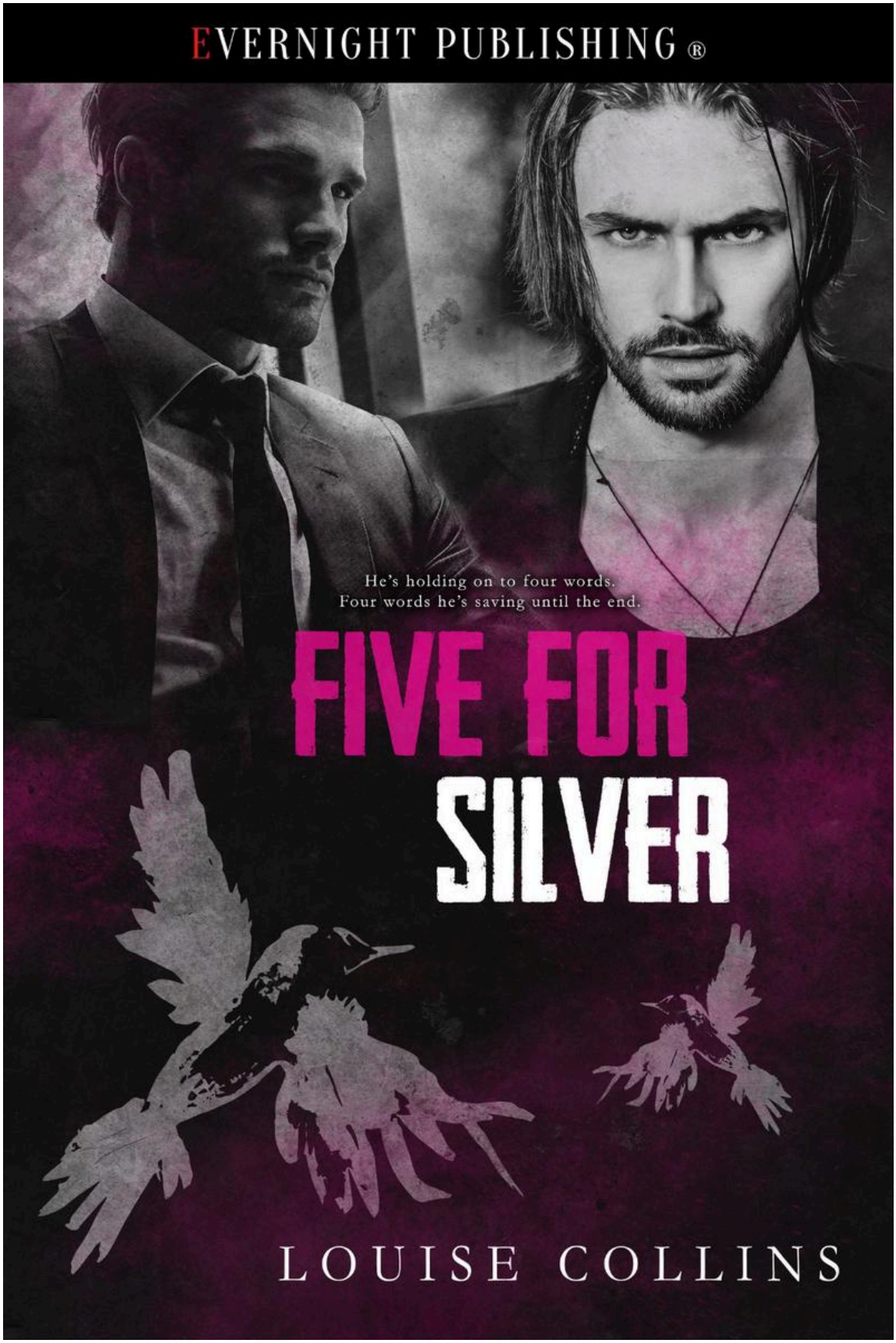
He's holding on to four words.
Four words he's saving until the end.

FIVE FOR SILVER

LOUISE COLLINS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FIVE FOR SILVER

The Magpie Rhyme, 5

Louise Collins

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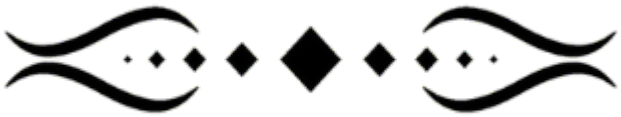

Chapter One

They chattered.

They chortled.

The noise of them invaded Chad's sleep.

Magpies.

Romeo's winged demons in the field.

When they'd first moved in, they were a rare sight. There were blackbirds, robins, and other small songbirds, but under Romeo's favoritism and discrimination, the magpies learned to stick around.

They had an ally in Romeo, and just like that, he established order in the outside world with the magpies as the top predator.

Chad blinked the ceiling into focus while his heart skipped and tripped. A low, long groaned escaped him as he grabbed a pillow and pressed it to his face.

It didn't help.

The sharp birdcalls went through the barrier, spearing into his skull and rattling his brain.

Chad would've preferred the sound of roosters or car horns, or a catastrophic explosion to Romeo's army of magpies clacking out their machine gun call. It got worse when Romeo joined them, clacking his tongue to the roof of his mouth, calling more down from the trees around their field. If it hadn't been going on for weeks, Chad would've been impressed with how well Romeo mimicked them, but for six consecutive weekends, he'd woken disoriented and inside a war zone with the sun only just peeking out from the horizon.

Chad stumbled as he got out of bed, taking the duvet with him as he trudged to the window and yanked open the curtains. Romeo stood in a tornado of wings and claws in their field of the dead, arms aloft, scattering seed. He watched, clacking, and greeting his feathered friends who twirled around him in a synchronized dance.

Romeo Knight.

Their God.

Chad rolled his eyes.

He rapped the glass, but the sound of magpies drowned him out.

"Damn it!"

He gripped the bottom of the window and heaved it open. Romeo didn't notice, too engrossed in the birds flying around him. The hood of his coat covered his head to protect from bird shit Chad imagined.

Chad opened his mouth to yell, but one bird broke free from the frenzy and headed his way. His frantic shooing did nothing to discourage the magpie. It swooped, Chad shivered at the wind from its wings, and the proximity of its claws to his face.

"Jesus," he hissed, lifting his arm to defend himself.

They were getting bolder, angrier, and if any other bird dared try to join in, they dove for it and took it from the sky. Chad had seen them kill.

It needed dealing with and the solution had four legs, a wagging tail and a lolling tongue.

Mercutio.

The stray magpie retreated to rejoin Romeo. Chad kept his arm ready in case another became brash and attacked him.

"It's 6:00 in the morning!"

Romeo turned to face him with his eyebrow raised. No apology, only amusement at a shirtless Chad hanging out of the window.

Chad rubbed his eyes, waiting for Romeo to at least look sheepish. But this was Romeo, and all Chad got was a wolfish smile.

"Exactly." Romeo called back.

"What?"

"It's their breakfast time."

"It's Saturday." Chad yawned into his hand. "I was working late last night."

The case they'd been working on was near enough closed, they were just waiting on Dead-Dave's autopsy report to file everything away into the domestic homicide cabinet.

A simple case of a wife killing her husband because of his infidelity. Knife wounds aplenty, Dead-Dave had been undecided on the killing blow with so many to choose from and decided he needed the weekend to decide what happened to the victim, blow by blow, second by second.

"Not the magpies' fault," Romeo dove his hand into his coat pocket, threw another handful of seed, then began a slow plod towards the house. He tugged down his hood and combed back his hair with his fingers. It was long enough that the natural waves in Romeo's hair were showing, curling

the strands beneath his ears. The messy hair, the gruff beard, and the piercing eyes did things to Chad despite his annoyance.

Romeo was handsome, even tracking back to the house through a muddy field, with birds cawing and scraping behind him.

“All you need is a black coat and a scythe.”

“I like the sound of that.”

A crow landed close by and Romeo yelled at it until it flew away.

“You shouldn’t do that.” Chad told him.

“Why not?”

“They deserve to eat, too.”

Romeo gestured behind himself. “And they can. They can find their own.”

Chad sighed as Romeo passed out of Chad’s sight, and into the house through the kitchen door.

He slammed shut the window, listening to Romeo trek through the kitchen.

Chad bit his lip.

He grabbed a bottle of lube, then trudged into their ensuite bathroom to splash water on his face and brush his teeth. Romeo appeared behind him in the doorway a few minutes later.

He watched Chad in the mirror who paused mid-brush to glare back.

“6:00 in the morning.” Chad spoke around his toothbrush.

Romeo stepped closer and wrapped his arms around Chad’s waist.

“It’s Saturday, and that’s how you chose to wake me?”

Romeo narrowed his eyes in the mirror. The edge of his mouth pulled upwards. “How else did you want to be woken?”

“I can think of a few ways that would be particularly nice.”

“Oh, yeah?”

Chad hummed and resumed brushing.

“Has anyone ever told you, it’s rude to talk with your mouth full?”

Before Chad could snipe back, Romeo pulled the toothbrush from his mouth.

“Romeo!” Chad squawked, blushing hard at the toothpaste that had leaked from the edge of his lips. The shock of it had him swallowing his mouthful of mint.

Chad’s eyes burned.

Romeo smirked, slotting Chad's toothbrush back into the holder. He turned Chad around in his arms and wiped his rough thumb over the edge of Chad's mouth.

Chad shivered. His cock began hardening in his boxers at that tiniest touch.

No, Chad inwardly told *it*, he was not horny, he was angry.

"One of your swarm tried to kill me."

"Again with the dramatics?"

"It did, Romeo—it almost took my eye out."

Romeo snorted, shaking his head.

"They've become obsessive over you like you are over them."

"Ridiculous. There's only one thing I'm obsessive over…"

Chad flared his nostrils. "So I'm a thing, am I?"

"Not always. Right now, you're a … moody person, five letters."

"I am not a grump."

"Hand job for the grump?"

Chad's jaw fell. He spluttered on air. "What?"

Romeo's arms gripped Chad tighter. "I asked if the *grump* would like a hand job?"

"I'm not a grump," Chad bit the inside of his cheek. "And no, I don't."

"Fair enough." Romeo said, releasing his hold. "I'll see you downstairs—"

"Wait…"

"What is it?"

Chad looked down at himself, or more specifically his fully erect cock in his boxers. Romeo folded his arms, staring at it, too.

"So, you do want a hand job?"

"Yes." Chad squeezed the word through his teeth.

"Then say it."

Mischief glinted in Romeo's eyes.

"Say what?"

"The grump wants a hand job."

"I'm not saying that."

"Then no hand job." Romeo retreated to the doorway. "I'll see you downstairs for breakfast."

“Fine,” Chad snapped. “I don’t need you for a hand job anyway.”

He turned his back to Romeo, thrusting his hand down the waistband of his boxers. Romeo slammed into him, taking Chad by the wrist and pulling his hand away from his cock.

“Not allowed.”

Romeo pinned Chad’s arm to his stomach and slipped his free hand into Chad’s boxers. He skipped his fingers past Chad’s cock and caressed the top of Chad’s thigh.

Chad tried to thrust against Romeo’s forearm, but it was a futile attempt to get off.

“Just say it.” Romeo nipped Chad’s ear.

“I want a hand job.”

“Who wants a hand job?”

Dignity be damned. Chad couldn’t look at himself in the mirror.

“The grump wants a hand job.”

“See, wasn’t that easy?”

For a fleeting moment Chad thought about slapping Romeo’s arm, shoving him away, and reclaiming some of his thrown away dignity, but then Romeo’s warm, rough hand took hold of him, and need swiftly replaced thought.

“Eyes on the mirror.” Romeo said by Chad’s ear.

Chad stopped his eyes from sliding shut, and watched through the mirror as Romeo jerked his cock, still in his boxers.

“I want to see,” Chad murmured.

Romeo snorted and tugged Chad’s boxers down to his thighs. Chad groaned, sucking in his bottom lip. He watched through half-hooded eyes as Romeo worked his hand back and forth over his cock.

The wet sound brought a blush to Chad’s cheeks.

“You’re so fucking perfect for me.” Romeo whispered.

Chad found his eyes in the mirror. Romeo stroked his other hand over Chad’s chest, covering and revealing the scars as he went. He dragged his thumb nail against a sensitive number three beneath Chad’s left pec. Chad shivered. Romeo moved on, twisting one of Chad’s nipples, forcing him to jerk onto his tiptoes in response, and press his back to Romeo’s front.

“I still can’t believe I can have all this,” Romeo murmured.

He wasn't just talking about the sex, but home, the magpies, the murders.

Chad had given him it all.

"I'm so fucking lucky."

Romeo stroked his hand lower until it joined his other hand's goal of making Chad explode all over the sink.

"Everything is … just *right*."

Chad moaned as Romeo's hands swallowed him completely, hiding his red tip. He couldn't keep his eyes open any longer as he got swept away by bliss, squirting through the cave of Romeo's fingers as he came with a whimper.

Romeo rested his chin on Chad's shoulder as Chad caught his breath.

"I'm sorry I woke you up." Romeo said.

Chad snorted. "You're halfway to forgiven."

"Halfway?"

Chad hummed, pressing his ass back against the swell in Romeo's sweatpants. He tilted his head back and gave Romeo a coy smile before sliding away the towel on the side to reveal the lube.

Romeo grumbled, reaching for the bottle. "You played me?" He smirked, flicking the cap.

"Maybe a little." Chad sighed, arching his back so Romeo could have him as he braced against the sink.

Romeo chuckled, filling his hand with lube. He rubbed it over himself before spearing it into Chad with greedy fingers. Chad's nails stung as he dug them into the chrome of the sink, breathing harder and harder the longer he had to wait.

Romeo pushed his cock inside, and Chad watched him in the mirror with a slack mouth. Romeo didn't look back at him. His burning eyes were fixed on his cock slowly disappearing inside Chad's body. He groaned when he slid all the way in and lifted his eyes to the mirror. Their gazes locked as Romeo began rolling his hips, thrusting in and out, never breaking eye contact. Chad's skin exploded with goosebumps, and he conceded first, letting his eyes slide shut as sensation took over.

"Fuck, Romeo."

Romeo pressed his face into Chad's neck, taking him harder. It didn't matter that he'd come minutes before, Romeo punched another orgasm out of him before groaning into Chad's neck as he followed.

They found their way back to bed afterwards, and Chad fell asleep with his head on Romeo's chest, listening to his heart go from racing back to calm while thinking Romeo had it wrong.

Chad was the lucky one.

Romeo pressed a soft kiss to Chad's temple as he woke from their impromptu nap.

"I'm sorry about this morning, it's part of my routine. Magpies, breakfast, languages, gym, lunch, recipes, case files, cooking shows, dinner."

Romeo listed off his activities as if they were the most natural thing in the world. Domestic bliss while searching for someone to kill.

Chad smiled, struggling up in bed to rest against the headboard. "You more than made up for it."

Romeo sat up beside him and reached beneath the duvet to squeeze Chad's thigh.

"One more day." Chad said, watching carefully for Romeo's reaction.

"One more day."

Romeo narrowed his eyes at the dog bed in the corner of the bedroom. One of three beds in total. Romeo approved of the beds in the kitchen and living room, but the bedroom dog bed kept vanishing only to reappear after Chad had managed to find it in the house.

Chad had been counting down the days until Merc came home, gaging Romeo's feelings on the matter, but he'd been emotionless throughout.

"What time's your appointment with Keeley?"

"2:00. Do you want anything from town?"

Romeo pursed his lips, his eyes whipped back and forth as he thought. "A bird feeder."

"You are the bird feeder," Chad smirked.

"A freestanding one."

"Right." Chad sighed. It was always about the birds. Romeo's gaze pressed on him, and he glanced up and paused when Romeo's lips moved into a smile.

"If you want me to wake you up in a *nice* way, it'll come in handy for feeding the magpies in the morning and keeping me in bed for longer. Win-win for everyone."

“In that case, I’ll buy two.”

****

The session with Keeley flew by, mainly because the hot topic of conversation was Merc. Merc, just the thought of him, had already helped Chad. He was something to focus on that stopped the memories of Vincent Whitehall and Tate from taking over.

Keeley approved of a dog and rattled off a load of studies conducted that concluded dogs helped with depression, isolation, loneliness, and PTSD.

Chad nodded along and bit his tongue not to add his own hope for the new addition to his and Romeo’s lives.

The cold cases he’d given Romeo were just that—*cold*. Either no evidence, or most of the players involved had already died, and although he didn’t outwardly complain, Chad knew his craving—his need—itched away at his soul.

Chad hoped Merc would distract him from the longing to kill and make the time between murders more bearable.

He also hoped Merc would bond with Romeo. Chad had visited the rehoming center a few times, and they’d struck up a bond, but the day Merc came home would be the first day he’d meet Romeo. Sure, Merc had probably smelled Romeo’s scent all over Chad, but it would be the first time he’d sniff Romeo from the source.

Dogs could sniff out drugs, money, cancer, but could they sniff out a serial killer, untainted by evidence, but a serial killer’s genetic make-up?

Would Merc know after one sniff?

Would he growl, shake, or run the hell away?

“Chad!”

He blinked, snapping back to attention. He shuffled, eyeing Keeley leaning forward in her chair.

“Sorry?”

“I asked if you were okay?”

Chad nodded, rolling out the knots in his shoulders.

Of course, Merc wouldn’t be able to detect Romeo’s nature.

He was being stupid.

“I’m fine.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Just… I want him to like us.”

“Who?”

“Merc,” Chad frowned, before squeezing his brow. “I want him to like me and Frank.”

“Ah, the new dog,” Keeley smiled. “Is Frank a dog lover, too?”

“This will be his first one.”

“I’m sure Frank will love him.”

Chad checked the time on his phone and got to his feet. “Fingers crossed.”

“Same time. Next week.”

Keeley had offered him a session once a week again after Tate, and Chad had readily accepted.

It helped.

Chad nodded as Keeley tapped away on her laptop, writing up a few key notes from their session. He closed the door softly behind himself as he left her office, waved at the receptionist, then stepped outside. He took a deep breath of fresh air and turned his thoughts to birdfeeders as he crossed the car park.

It was bright compared to Keeley’s mood-lit office and headrush assaulted him after sitting for so long on the couch.

A woman rushed past him with a pushchair. Her eyes were sunken, rimmed with black and her free brown hair lashed behind her in her haste to get across the car park. Her child, hidden by blankets, babbled away happily.

Chad smiled.

He’d shown Romeo strollers for dogs.

Romeo had growled that there was no way in hell they were getting one.

“Hey,” Chad called out, spying the stuffed rabbit that had fallen from the pushchair. The woman didn’t hear him and didn’t stop. Chad swiped the rabbit off the floor, and jogged to catch up, only to skid to a halt at the pick-up truck in the corner of the car park.

He couldn’t read the plate, but the truck shone a vibrant red, catching the stray sunbeams that managed to break through the thin clouds.

Chad stared at it.

He’d seen it before.

He’d seen it a lot in the past month.

So much so, that he'd convinced himself *this* pick-up truck was following him.

Keeley had tried to rationalize his paranoia.

He'd been noticing more and more red trucks, but not the same make or model. It was a coincidence, not a stalker and yet, Chad bristled at the touch of eyes.

Chad changed direction, heading straight towards it.

The engine rumbled into life, and the truck pulled away, slicing into traffic to the sound of furious car horns. Chad squinted, but he was still too far away to read the plate.

He curled his fingers into something soft before realizing he still had hold of the rabbit.

"Shit."

The woman had gone, and Chad could no longer hear the rattle of her pushchair.

He sighed, and studied the rabbit. Peter Rabbit. And by the intricate gold stitching, not a cheap one. He tugged Peter's blue waistcoat firmly around his body, then trudged back to his car.

The woman didn't reappear, and neither did the red truck.

Chad admitted defeat and drove home, only for Romeo to meet him on the doorstep with his arms crossed and eyebrow raised.

"Bird feeder?"

"Shit," Chad backed up. "I'll go get one."

Romeo caught his arm before Chad could escape. "Don't worry about it."

"But I want my *nice* wake up calls."

"How could I deny my Juliet anything," Romeo said, pulling Chad into the house. "I'll order a bird feeder online."

Chad's mouth dropped at the pile of chain spilling out of a delivery box in the entrance hall.

"Urm … Romeo?"

"It's for Mercutio." Romeo replied with a shrug.

"Chain?"

"And padlocks."

Chad picked a section of chain from the box, gaping at the weight. "What the hell?"

“Just in case he’s vicious.”

“We’re not getting a goddamn werewolf, Romeo. He’s a timid, sweet boy.”

“Don’t make me jealous.”

Chad tried to shove the box with his foot, but it didn’t budge. “Outhouse.”

“Fine.” Romeo leaned over to heave the box off the floor. “No need to be a *grump* about it.”

He winked as he passed through the doorway.

Chapter Two

Merc waited for him in the reception area, tail whipping against the chair legs and creating a musical tune. He'd been named Gary by the staff, but he didn't respond to it. He didn't respond to much.

Chad had bought a few books about dog training and presented them to Romeo.

Romeo threatened to throw them on the fire.

The woman holding onto his collar was Sally. She may've been a small woman, but she held onto Merc like he was nothing. She cooed at the dog before turning to Chad with twinkling blues and asking, "Is dad ready?"

Dad

He'd never felt like he was the dad to Toby. Toby had been his protector, his companion, the only thing that gave Chad's life any spark. This dog was different, he was the added spark, rather than the only one burning.

Chad nodded, and she released the collar. Merc tried to launch himself across the room, paws slipping in his desperate attempt, like a cartoon character.

"He's been whining and anxious all day," Sally said, smiling. "He knew something was different."

Chad dropped to his knees and accepted the kisses on his face. Merc's thick skull knocked into Chad's jaw, his chin, even his nose, but the small pains were almost welcome with Merc's obvious enthusiasm over his new owner. Chad stroked him and cooed into his ears that he was a good boy.

"I've just got some paperwork for you to fill out, then he's all yours."

Chad stood up and tripped his way to the desk with Merc pawing at his legs. Sally had the clipboard ready, and after a few quick signatures, she handed over Merc's lead with a bright smile.

"Any problems, give us a call."

"I will."

Merc settled down as Chad clipped the lead on his collar. He gazed up at Chad expectantly, big silver eyes wide with excitement.

"Shall we go home?"

His words got a tentative tail wag. Chad smiled and led Merc to the door. His tail picked up the pace, battering the door frame as they made their way outside. Merc dragged him in the direction of the car, not stopping at the trunk, he bounded up to the passenger side and covered the door with muddy paw prints.

Ever since Josh had given him *Gary's* leaflet, Chad had only imagined Merc as his and Romeo's dog. Merc's grey coat, with a white tummy, and two dazzling silver eyes had hypnotized him. Sally had told him they thought he was only a year or so old, still young in the face, eager to please and brimming with a need to express affection.

Merc sat on the passenger seat for the drive home, watching out the window while holding Peter Rabbit in his mouth. Chad didn't have the heart to take it off him, having forgotten he'd left the stuffed toy in the car.

Merc's tale twitched every so often, with pent-up excitement or a tad of nerves, Chad didn't know, but when he talked to him, two big eyes found his and stayed there.

"I'm your dad." Chad snorted. "But you've got another *dad* to meet, too."

Merc cocked his head, still watching.

"I'm not sure how he is with animals. I mean, he likes the magpies … at least I think he likes them, and he's got an attachment to them." He shuddered. "You're cuter, and way more affectionate, and I'm hoping… I'm hoping you'll keep him company when I'm at work, distract him from the … monster, give him something else to focus on."

They hit a bump in the road. Chad cursed, adjusting the mirror, and there it was.

The red truck behind him.

His stalker in pursuit.

He slowed, hoping to catch sight of the plate but the truck slowed, too, keeping its distance.

"Stop it," Chad growled to himself. He curled his hands around the wheel. "It's paranoia."

Keeley's paranoia diagnosis came after Chad had told her he thought a red Toyota Hilux was following him, before changing his mind to a Ford Ranger, then back again.

Another red 4x4 passed him going the other direction and he slumped.

Merc dropped Peter Rabbit and climbed onto Chad's lap.

"Easy," Chad blurted, shifting to adjust for the dog.

When he glanced at the mirror again, the truck had gone.

"I'm losing my mind."

Merc licked him under the chin.

Chad chuckled and patted him on the head. "I hope Romeo likes you."

He turned onto the track road that led to the house. "And I hope you like Romeo."

The car bounced as they rolled closer. Merc's ears were up as he fixed his eyes on the house in front of them.

"Home," Chad said, opening the door.

A flash of black appeared in the corner of his eye. Wings swooped on top of the outhouse, and feet clacked as the bird landed. Chad couldn't see it, but he knew it was up there.

Not a blackbird or a crow or a magpie, but something else.

He heard the machine gun call from the field, and knew Romeo must've been feeding them.

They clucked and cawed, and Chad gritted his teeth as he walked Merc around the side of the house. Romeo stood in an oversized trench coat, pockets weighted down by seed, doing his best impression of the reaper with his hood over his head. He had his back to Chad, but one bark from Merc and he spun around, wide-eyed.

Merc wagged his tail, and jumped on his lead, eager to greet the strange man with his army of feathers.

"Hi," Chad blurted.

"That's him then…"

"Yeah," Chad petted Merc on the head. "This is Merc … you're going to love him, Romeo."

"That's very optimistic. It took me long enough to get comfortable with the idea of loving you, but I will tolerate that scruffy thing."

Chad leaned down to cover Merc's ears. "You're not scruffy."

"Bring him over," Romeo said, gesturing with his hand.

Chad moved towards Romeo with Merc at a stalk beside him. He tripped on a stray rock, and the lead slipped from his hands. *Fuck.* Chad reached for the lead but missed.

Merc took off barking at the magpies, chasing them around the field. Romeo's face paled before his eyes sharpened on the dog, and Chad's heart punched out danger over and over.

"Romeo…"

"He'd dead." Romeo hissed through his teeth, setting off after Merc. Chad near-flat lined at the promise in Romeo's voice, but he only took two strides over the mud before falling over and landing on his face.

A nervous laugh crept past Chad's lips.

He tried to cover it with his hand as Romeo got to his feet, but he knew it was obvious by the death glare he received. The side of Romeo's face was covered in mud, along with both of his hands. He flexed his fingers in front of himself, targeting Merc in the field with his glare. The mud was too slippery for Romeo to pursue him and too slippery for Merc to catch a bird.

Romeo trudged back to the house while flinging the mud from his hands.

Undeterred, Chad whistled, and Merc gave up chasing the magpies, and bounded towards the house, flicking up mud in his wake. He knocked into Romeo's legs as he rushed inside, stamping mud all over the place and eliciting another growl of outrage from Romeo.

"Chad!" Romeo snapped, "We need the chain."

"No, we don't."

Merc skidded through the kitchen and into the hall.

Chad grabbed Romeo by the wrists and squeezed until he stopped miming strangling Merc. He got to the door first and shut Merc in the living room before coming face to face with a raging Romeo.

"You've got to calm down."

"Calm down!"

"If you have a heart attack you know I can't call an ambulance, right?"

Romeo took a deep breath, pushing out his pecs. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

"Yes, and no, but you've got to calm down, count to ten."

“Chad,” he snapped the name, and Chad winced. “Shove him in the outhouse.”

“It’s cold out there.”

“I don’t care.”

“Please,” Chad tried, pulling Romeo’s hands towards him. They stiffened and refused to hold onto his waist like he wanted. “It’s warm in here, he can’t sleep outside.”

“Then I’ll sleep outside.”

“But then I’d get cold. I need you to keep me warm in bed.” Chad said, brushing his hands through Romeo’s hair. One side of his hair was easier to get his fingers through, the other was clumpy with earth. Anger continued to flitter over Romeo’s face, but he no longer stared Chad in the eye, he looked at his mouth and watched as the begging words came out.

“Please, Romeo. Please let me keep him.”

“He went after the magpies.”

Chad pouted. “But they’re just so tempting … he probably thought he was protecting you.”

“He did it for fun.”

“Don’t take it personally,” Chad leaned in to kiss Romeo’s throat. One kiss. Two kisses. “You said we could keep him. You told me to get him.”

“I’ve changed my mind.” Romeo lifted his chin, encouraging more.

Chad obliged, running his lips down Romeo’s neck. “Please.” He tried again, gripping the sides of Romeo’s trench coat. He eased it over Romeo’s shoulders, and let it fall to the floor, scattering seed all over the tiles. Romeo tensed his jaw, but more kisses from Chad relaxed his expression, and moments later, he tilted his chin back again and let out a blissful sigh.

His eyes fluttered shut, and Chad pressed forward with his advantage, pulling Romeo’s t-shirt over his head.

The clothes had saved Romeo’s chest from the mud. Chad leaned in just to lick his chest, moaning at the masculine taste of a sweat slick Romeo. Romeo produced heat like a furnace, particularly when he was angry or turned on. Chad didn’t know which one was affecting his skin, but it was the latter that was speeding up his breathing and making him fidget.

“Say we can keep him.”

“You think you can suck my dick, and I’ll be fine with that *thing* in the other room.”

Chad shrugged. “I don’t see the harm in trying.”

“You’re playing dirty.”

Chad licked a wet stripe between Romeo’s pecs, down to his belly button. Dropping to his knees, he took hold of Romeo’s hips.

“That dog’s probably got mud all over the sofa.”

Chad bit his lip. “No probably about it.”

“Pawprints up the walls.”

“Most definitely.”

Romeo flared his nostrils and shot daggers with his eyes at the living room door.

“You know something else,” Chad spoke closer to Romeo’s naval. “He’s probably ripped up one of your magpie cushions, too, and thrown the stuffing everywhere.”

Romeo glared at Chad on his knees, but Chad could see the desire before the anger. No monster lurked in his eyes. He was irritated, no doubt about it, but it wasn’t the *need* that had him stiffening and relaxing his jaw. This was a Romeo issue, not a monster one.

“You could go in there and stop him.”

Romeo exhaled heavily.

“Or you can stay here and let me kiss you some more.”

Romeo could never resist the touch of Chad’s mouth, especially when he’d been made to wait while Chad worked a case. They’d had sex the day before, but it had been weeks since Chad had wrapped his mouth around Romeo’s cock and pleasured him that way.

“More.”

He squirmed when Chad kissed his stomach, whined when he brushed his lips featherlight over the V of his hip, and when Chad unbuckled him—he moaned. A deep rumbly moan that traveled down his body.

Romeo stepped backward, dragging Chad with him until he met the wall with a thump. Chad tugged down Romeo’s jeans and boxers, all the way to his mud-covered boots. He exposed Romeo’s hard cock. It jolted. Chad caught it in his hand, flexing his fist around the wide girth.

Romeo huffed. “I hate that you can do this to me.”

“You love it, too.” Chad reminded. He touched his lips to the head of Romeo’s cock, and kissed away his pre come, “See.”

“It’s unnerving.”

Chad nuzzled with his face, then whispered, “You love that I make you feel out of control.”

Romeo made a noise like he disagreed.

“You do because you love the feeling that you’re hanging on, that you want to take me, but you fear the monster might misread the signals and come out to play. You’ve told me before, that danger, that excitement, it’s addicting and goes straight to your cock. It’s the same reason you like strangling me while we make love. The contradictions of man and monster add to it.”

The deep thump of Romeo’s Adam’s apple made Chad smile.

“I like it, too,” Chad admitted on a whisper before swirling his tongue around Romeo’s crown. He groaned at the muskiness, and his taste buds tingled for more.

“Your idea of foreplay is dangerous,” Romeo muttered.

“Sex with you always has a bit of risk involved.”

There was only one way Romeo could feel in control again, and that was by taking it, and Chad pushed him towards it, teased, and smirked, kissing and lightly licking, but never enough until a firm hand gripped his hair.

Chad looked up at Romeo, dark and handsome, with a gruff beard, and pupil-blown eyes.

“Show me how much you want that dog.”

Chad sucked in as much of Romeo’s cock as he could. It wasn’t enough proof for Romeo, he pressed himself deeper, slipping too far until the evitable happened, and Chad choked.

His fingers twisted in Chad’s hair. Romeo rolled his hips forward and his cock thrust into Chad’s mouth. Not as deep, but with added urgency, and an animalistic quality to his actions. Not a need to kill, but one to satisfy himself using Chad’s mouth.

Chad’s jaw ached, his tongue tingled, and the drool running from his mouth down his neck made him feel so dirty. It itched on his throat, and his cheeks burned with embarrassment, but he loved it. He loved being stuffed full and used by Romeo.

Chad licked, lapped, twirled, and fluttered his tongue against Romeo's sliding cock until a hitch in Romeo's breathing confirmed he was doing something right. The angle changed. Chad gripped onto Romeo's hips to steady himself. He couldn't lick or suck anymore, could only take, and Romeo made him take it, thrusting into him with the same power he'd used the day before in the bathroom.

Chad's eyes watered, his throat ached, and the lack of oxygen numbed his fingers and toes. The dribble on his neck no longer bothered him, he couldn't feel much of anything as black crept into the edges of his vision, tunneling so all he could see was Romeo's dark eyes watching him.

Romeo's cum rushed over his tongue. He swallowed it down despite his lungs burning with the need for air. Romeo slipped out, Chad fell back on his ass, wheezing for breath. He gasped for it at Romeo's feet while he watched with an emotionless expression.

"Romeo?"

Chad couldn't help the croak or the fear that crept into his voice.

Romeo swooped, dropping to his knees, and lifting Chad's chin. He pressed his lips against Chad's softly and slipped his tongue into Chad's mouth in what felt like an apology.

Chad sighed into it. Shuffling forward on his knees, he gripped Romeo's shoulders for balance as they kissed.

When Romeo pulled away, it was only to murmur out, "Sometimes I think you're suicidal."

Then they were kissing again, slow lingering kisses where time seemed to stop.

Romeo's tongue brushed against Chad's lazily, like he was savoring Chad's mouth. No longer brutal, but sensual. Chad clutched onto the gentleness, the easy way he teased his mouth, and the way his mind filled with a pleasant fuzz.

Romeo was hard and dangerous, but he could be sweet and soft, too, and Chad loved the combination of both.

Romeo broke away. "He chased my birds."

"We'll teach him not to." Chad bit his lip. "You weren't really going to hurt him, were you?"

"I have no desire to kill the dog despite it chasing my magpies."

"You said you'll give him a chance."

“Coming in your mouth is not a substitute for me saying I’ll give the dog a chance.”

Chad shook Romeo’s shoulders. “*Please*, Romeo.”

“I hate it when you use that tone. It hits me right in the gut, feels like the organ is malfunctioning or something.” He shuddered. “What is this, guilt?”

“Please. It was your idea in the first place.”

“You had the leaflet.”

“You told me to ring the number.”

Romeo groaned.

“Ha. I win the argument.” Chad announced, bouncing to his feet. His head drifted with the lack of oxygen, and Romeo steadied him before he could fall.

“You okay?”

“Stood up too quickly. Come on,” Chad pulled Romeo’s arm. “Let’s give you a proper introduction.”

Romeo didn’t reply, he stood up while continuing to stop Chad from falling. Once he knew Chad was steady, he pulled up his jeans and fixed his buckle.

“He better not have torn up my cushions.”

Chad smirked, linking his fingers through Romeo’s. He pulled Romeo over to the living room door, opening it enough for Merc to squeeze out and waddle over.

“Merc, meet Romeo.”

Merc sniffed Romeo’s muddy boots before sitting in front of him, swishing his tail against the ground. His long tongue dangled out as he panted up at Romeo.

“Romeo, meet Mercutio, or Merc for short.” Chad pulled Romeo’s hand down to Merc’s head and made him pat him. “Your new best friend...”

Chapter Three

"Merc though," Josh said for the fifth time. He frowned at the light in the ceiling, his blue eyes shining as he whispered out, "Merc?"

Chad shrugged. "He looks like a Merc."

"How can anything look like a Merc?" Josh reached for a doughnut from the box, sprinkling sugar all down his front as he took a huge bite. "Other than a Mercedes."

Ally peered through her thick framed purple glasses at him. "Why name your dog after a car? Why not a bike? Harley."

"That's a nice name," Josh replied, ruffling his sugar covered hand through his blond hair. He was leaning back in his chair with the front two legs off the floor and Chad thought about tipping him over to see him flap his arms and squawk.

"Or Davidson," Ally continued. "He looks like a Davidson."

She was still staring at Chad, and raised one of her thin eyebrows as if it would make him consider the name. She was a small woman, but fierce, and usually Chad would fold under the weight of her dark eyed stare, but this time he didn't.

"He's called Merc."

She tutted. Her black hair shimmered with a hint of purple as she turned her head to share a disappointed look with Josh.

They were both perplexed by the name, but he couldn't tell them the truth behind it, couldn't tell him it was a play on Romeo and Juliet, Mercutio being Romeo's best friend and the whole notion of a dog being man's best friend.

Ally picked a doughnut from the box, but rather than take a huge mouthful like Josh, she tore off pieces fit for a squirrel.

"We're really fitting into the detectives eating doughnuts and drinking coffee all day stereotype, huh?" Chad mumbled.

Ally pushed a pea-sized amount past her lips, and Josh stuffed the rest of his doughnut in his mouth with a groan. He licked his fingers once he'd swallowed it down.

"So … when can I meet him?" Josh asked.

"You want to meet Merc?"

"Of course I do, it was me that set you up in the first place."

Chad snorted. “That sounds like we’re dating.”

Ally cleared her throat. “Which reminds me, I want a formal introduction to this fella of yours, Frank,” She wagged a finger at Chad.

“Me, too.” Josh added.

Chad folded his arms. “You’ve met him.”

“He had a mask on, unless he’s that hideously ugly you don’t want me to see him.”

Chad went to retort, but couldn’t.

“Oh, shit,” Josh said. “He’s not a looker then.”

“He’s…self-conscious about his appearance.”

Josh pulled a face. “No need to say anymore, I get it.”

“You don’t, but back to Merc,” Chad said, flapping his hand. “How about Saturday?”

Josh opened his mouth to reply, but snapped it shut when Faye popped her head into the room.

“Dave wants to see you,” she said.

Ally lifted her hands to the ceiling. “Rejoice. About time. Has he finally decided how our man died?”

“Stab wound,” Josh said, “Thought that was obvious, he had about fifty.”

“Twenty-eight,” Chad corrected. “Dave wasn’t certain whether it was the one through the heart that killed him or the one in the *groin*.”

Ally reached over and shut Josh’s mouth before any doughnut could fall out. He swallowed, paling. “I don’t want to see that.”

“Miss Scarlett in the basement with the dagger,” Ally said to herself with a laugh.

“What the hell are you on about?” Josh asked. “The suspect isn’t called Miss Scarlett, and she didn’t use a dagger, it was a kitchen knife.”

“It was a Clue reference.”

Josh glanced at Chad for help. “A what?”

“Clue.” Ally repeated slowly.

“How does saying it like that help?” Josh rubbed his chin. “Is that some ancient game like backgammon?”

“How can you not know Clue?” Ally hissed.

“I’m not ancient like some.”

Ally flexed her fingers in front of Josh's face. "Sometimes I want to just wring your neck."

"Kinky."

Chad pressed his lips together not to laugh.

"It just needs two of you to go down there," Faye said, flexing her eyebrows at Ally who understood and grinned at Josh.

"As you've annoyed me this morning," Ally fluttered her eyelashes. "You and Chad can go down there and talk to Dave while me and Faye sit here, munching on doughnuts and drinking coffee, like the pros we are."

"How did I annoy you?" Josh asked.

"By insinuating I'm old for my Clue reference."

"But you are old."

Chad grabbed Josh by the arm and hauled him from the chair. "Come on, before she really does throttle you."

He pulled Josh out of the incident room before Ally had a chance to throw something in Josh's direction. They hurried down the stairs, dodging a few officers on the way to the floor above.

They made it to the morgue when Chad had to ask, "You know the game Clue, right? The board game?"

"I've got no *clue*, what Clue is."

Chad squinted. "Josh? You're not serious are you?"

He smiled. "Of course I know what it is, but it's more fun to act oblivious and wind-up Ally, and now you've said it aloud, it's not a bad name for a dog."

"Clue?"

"No, I was referring to my name, Josh."

Chad shoved him. "I can't call him Josh."

"Is there a greater person to name him after?"

"How about Dave?"

"You'd name your dog after the guy that pokes at corpses, and not after me, your best friend?"

Chad sighed. "He's called Merc, and I'm sticking with Merc."

"How about Josh as a middle name? Merc Josh Fuller. I like the sound of that."

Chad pushed open the door and led the way to Dave's lair in the basement of the police station. The lack of windows left the place feeling

claustrophobic and the buzzing lights above added to the creep factor.

Chad poked his head inside Dave's office but found it empty.

"Guess he's still in *there*." Chad said.

Josh shuddered, hugging his arms around himself. "Does it feel haunted down here to you?"

"You and your *hauntings*," Chad looked back at Josh over his shoulder. "My house, this place—"

"Your house is definitely haunted, and there are literal dead people down here, come to think of it … have you ever seen Dave actually touch something?"

"Unbelievable," Chad muttered, striding away. "He's called Dead-Dave because he works with the dead, not because he's a ghost."

They ventured further down the corridor to the mortuary. Dave stood on the other side of the window to the lab, kitted out in white scrubs, and their latest victim, Mr. Watney, lay on a gurney beside him.

Josh spoke through his teeth. "All he has to do is give us the file."

"All geniuses like their brilliance heard."

"Cutting up dead bodies isn't brilliance."

Dave waved them inside. Chad went first, with Josh glued to his back.

"Come now, Josh," Dave said. "You saw worse at the crime scene."

"It's a different kind of gruesome, this … this is *haunting*."

"Enough with the haunting." Chad replied.

Dave removed the sheet, and Chad looked down on Mr. Watney and thought, as rare as it was, Josh had a point. They'd seen Mr. Watney at the scene, slumped in his armchair, blood splatters around the walls. It had been gruesome, but there was something cold and absent about seeing him pale-skinned and naked, with no oozing wounds, or sign of red.

Red, as stark and horrifying as it was, always reminded Chad of life, the recently distinguished, but on the table, with the puckered purple skin of his wounds, he looked a different level of horrifying.

"Twenty-eight knife wounds. All to the front of the body, all deep, all done with force."

"But which one killed him?" Josh asked.

Dave glared. "I was getting to that if you'd let me finish."

"Go on," Chad said, stepping back on Josh's toes.

Josh grunted.

“The toxicology report showed he had a high concentration of alcohol in his system. The lack of defensive wounds leads me to believe he was asleep, and the first blow was to the chest, severing his aorta. The stab wound to his groin sliced through the femoral artery. Both fatal wounds.”

“So you don’t know which killed him?” Josh asked.

“Both injuries killed him quickly, but I believe the one to the heart came first.”

“Why?”

Dave sighed and approached Josh. “Let’s say I’ve got a knife and stab you in the groin first. What do you think your reaction will be?”

Josh glanced at Chad. “I’d scream for help.”

“You’d curl over in a misguided effort to protect yourself, maybe even fall to your knees on the floor. There are no knife wounds on his back.”

“His hands,” Dave said stepping over to the table. He picked one up. Chad flashed a glance Josh’s way, a not-so-subtle look, Dave touched something and couldn’t possibly be a ghost.

“What about them?” Chad asked.

“They were covered in blood as if he’d attempted to stem blood flow. Blood would’ve taken significantly longer to soak through his jeans to stain his hands, compared to his bare chest. Thus, I believe the wound to the heart was the first infliction, followed by the one to the groin. He would’ve lost a significant amount of blood quickly and have been in shock.”

Dave looked at Chad, encouraging him to speak with a wave of his hand.

“It makes sense she stabbed his heart first. Throughout her interview, she kept referring to her broken heart. He broke hers by cheating, and she broke his by—”

“Knifing it. I get it.” Josh said, flinging his hands up in surrender. “It’s not how I’d want to go.”

Dave gestured to Mr. Watney. “I doubt he wanted to go out like this either.”

“Hey, Chad,” Josh said. “How about Watney as a name?”

“I’m not naming him after our latest murder victim.”

“Naming what?” Dave asked.

“Chad’s got a dog.”

Chad reddened, and snapped back, “Who already has a name.”

“Why so grumpy about it?” Dave asked.

“I’m not a grump.”

Josh threw an arm over Chad’s shoulders. “Proper grump is our Chad…”

The word grump took Chad back to two mornings ago in the ensuite bathroom with Romeo. He swallowed hard and ran a hand over his hair, refusing to go back there in front of Dave, Josh and a corpse.

Dave chuckled. “My dog when I was growing up was called Bones.”

“Of course it was,” Josh muttered. “Couldn’t have a nice name, had to be something to do with corpses.”

“Believe it or not, Josh, but there are bones in living people, too.”

Chad cleared his throat. “Have you got the file ready to take upstairs?”

“Yes,” Dave said, pointing out the window. “It’s on my desk.”

“Thanks.”

Dave covered Mr. Watney up with a sheet. Chad waved a goodbye before rushing to get the file from Dave’s office.

Josh followed close behind, darting looks back the way they’d come.

“Don’t call your dog Bones.”

Chad snorted. “It’s better than Watney.”

“Out of context, Watney is a good name for a dog.”

Chad grabbed the file and pushed it into Josh’s chest.

“Imagine how inappropriate it would be if the press got wind of me naming a dog after a murder victim.”

“Not after him, but the same name, besides … we’ve done worse. Frankenstein.”

“Frankenstein’s monster,” Chad corrected. “We were lucky to keep our jobs after that.”

Josh jogged up the stairs then waited for Chad at the top. He pulled the sleeve of his jacket down to reveal his watch. “And what time do you call this, Detective Fuller?”

“You’re an idiot.” Chad said, before beating Josh to the doors.

“There better be some doughnuts left,” Josh mumbled as Chad pushed inside.

Faye looked over from her desk. “And?”

“Shot through the heart, Bon Jovi,” Josh replied. “Classic song, hey, Ally?”

Ally didn’t reply, unlike Faye who’d turned to them when they’d come inside, Ally perched on her desk, and kept her full attention fixed on the DI’s office. The blinds were down, and the door was closed.

“Hey, boss,” Chad flapped the file from Dave at her. “Stab wound to the heart before—”

“Just put it here,” she patted the desk.

Chad obediently dropped the file.

He shoved his hands in his pockets, watching the DI’s office.

“You going to tell me what’s wrong?”

Faye answered, “The DI went in there with some elderly man a few minutes ago.”

“Would you say about Ally’s age?” Josh asked. “Eighty?”

He dived on his chair and ducked behind his laptop, but Ally didn’t whirl on him.

“I will remember you said that,” she warned. “The guy that went in there is *James Poole*.”

Chad winced before admitting through his teeth. “Never heard of him.”

“Detective. Retired detective.”

“Friend of the DI’s?”

“No.” Ally stroked her fingers over her creased brow. “He’s no friend.”

The blinds opened, and Chad caught his first glimpse of James Poole. White-haired, tall, wrinkled, and enthusiastically shaking the DI’s hand. He was old, and age had curved his spine forward. His smile stretched his lips, but the DI didn’t match it. The DI’s smile didn’t have the same reach, or last as long and it became clear while James was ecstatic about something, the DI wasn’t.

The DI opened the door, not meeting any of their eyes. “Chad, can you come in—”

“Detective Chad Fuller,” James said, strolling forward with his arm extended. Chad found his hand encased in James’s as he clung on, still grinning. Up close, Chad noticed the finer details, like the knot of James’s

tie being slightly askew, the crumbs on his shirt, and the strong coffee breath.

"It's so good to meet you," James said, releasing his hold on Chad's hand.

Chad glanced at the DI, but he continued to refuse him eye contact. "Nice to meet you, too."

James flattened a hand down his tie. "I'm Detective Inspector James Poole, but you can call me James if I can call you Chad."

"Ex detective," Ally smiled sweetly, but it didn't reach her eyes. "You retired. Almost a decade ago."

"I've come out of retirement. And you are?"

Ally narrowed her eyes. "Detective Sergeant Ally Coulson."

"Sergeant … you never went for inspector?"

"No. I didn't. Forgive me for my bluntness, but why are you here?"

The DI squeezed his temples. "Ally…"

"It's a valid question," James snorted. His smile returned. "I'm here because I have some fantastic news. We have the chance to put the past to rest. We can close the wound that has festered in Bardhum for decades."

Ally crossed her arms. "We?"

"Not you," James beamed at Chad. "But me and Chad."

"What wound?" Chad asked.

James scoffed, rearing back. "What do you mean *what wound*?"

The DI stepped into the room and gestured to his office. "Perhaps you'd like some privacy—"

"He's willing to disclose his last secret." James took a deep breath. "He's going to tell us where she is."

Chad stiffened and caught sight of Ally doing the same.

"You better not be talking about Vincent Whitehall?" she growled.

James nodded, undeterred. "Of course that's who I'm talking about. He wants to reveal the location of the *girl unfound*, Harriet Hastings."

"Brilliant," Ally said, glancing at Chad. "Where is she then?"

"He's willing to, but his memory is not what it was."

"Of course it isn't." Ally got to her feet, then sidestepped in front of Chad. She was too short to block James out, but her glare demanded Chad's attention. "You're not buying this, are you?"

Chad shook his head.

Ally slumped. “Good.”

“I visited Vincent a few months ago.” Chad said. “There’s nothing wrong with his memory. He knows exactly where Harriet is.”

“His cancer, the medication. It’s affected his memories. He’s not like the Vincent I’ve seen before. He’s incoherent and unaware of his surroundings most of the time.”

“You’ve … visited him?” Chad asked.

“On and off over the years,” James nodded. “But in the last few weeks he’s been speaking to the priest at Wiltknot and says he wants to cleanse his soul and admit to all his sins before he moves on. He wants to work *with* us. He wants our help in finding Harriet.”

“What’s this got to do with me?” Chad asked.

James rocked back on his heels. “He had conditions. Me being one of them, and you another. He wants us to help him remember.”

“And how do we do that?”

“Visits to Wiltknot, and escorted drives around the local area—”

“You’re kidding me!” Faye shouted, startling Chad forward. “You’re going to let Vincent Whitehall walk about?”

“Vincent is barely mobile. He will be in the car with myself and Chad while we drive him to locations to help jog his memory. He won’t leave the vehicle and he won’t be left alone.”

“This is crazy,” Ally shook her head.

“You’re not seeing the bigger picture,” James opened his arms. “We can give the Hastings family closure. We can find their daughter, sister, auntie, great auntie and lay her to rest. Vincent doesn’t have much time. *We* don’t have much time, Chad. We need to start today—”

“I’m sorry,” Chad backed up a step. “But I can’t.”

James’s eyes widened. “What? Why?”

“Vincent is a psychopath,” Ally hissed, “that’s why.”

“There’s no way he’s genuine,” Chad said. “When I saw him—”

“He’s not the same man you saw a few months ago. He’s different. Death, being so close to it, has given him a new perspective. He doesn’t want eternal damnation—”

“Well, he’s getting it,” Ally snapped. “Whether he wants it or not.”

“He wants forgiveness from God—”

Chad shook his head. “I’m not falling for it.”

“What does he have to gain from this?” James asked. His voice turned shrill. “There’s nothing in it for him, he’s dying. He’s got maybe a few *weeks* at most.”

“There’s always something in it for him.”

“He’s not willing to do this unless you’re involved.” James took a step closer. “I need your help. Harriet, rest her soul, needs your help.”

“If he was genuine, he’d want to cleanse his soul and find Harriet with or without me involved. I can’t help you.”

“Wow,” James barked a laugh. His hands tightened to fists at his sides. “After all I’ve read about you, the detective that survived two serial killers and worked your way back from disgrace, I never thought you’d be a coward.”

Ally geared up to take a swing, but it was DI’s voice that bellowed, freezing them all in place.

“Get the hell out of my incident room!”

James deflated. His hands slapped together, and he begged Chad with watering eyes, “Please. I didn’t mean that, it’s just, you don’t understand how much I—”

“Out!”

The DI’s face turned purple as a vein twitched at his temple. James glanced around frantically before grabbing a pen and Post-it pad from Josh’s desk.

“When you change your mind, call me.” James scribbled his number down. “I know you’ve been through a lot, Chad, but we’ve got a chance here to do something *good*. We can find her.” He tore off the Post-it and shoved it in Chad’s hand. “Please, please think about it—”

“I believe the DI told you to fuck off.” Ally snapped. “So not-so-kindly fuc—”

“I’m going,” James trudged away with his shoulders down, and his head hanging. He shoved open the doors, only to pause and look back at Chad before stepping through.

Chad curled his fingers around the note, crinkling James’s number into his palm.

For two months he’d been waiting for Vincent to make a move, and finally he had, but he’d refused to play whatever game he had planned.

He refused to let Vincent Whitehall inside his head.

Chapter Four

Chad's eye twitched.

He could sense Josh staring at the side of his face, debating whether to break their silence. Josh tore the sleeve of his takeaway coffee, a few millimeters at a time. Chad shuddered, tightening his hands around the wheel, doing his best to block Josh out as he accelerated into an optimistic gap in traffic.

Chad winced at the car horn berating his driving skills.

"Well," Josh said finally. "That was shit."

Chad exhaled. "There was room."

"Barely," Josh sipped his coffee. "When you offered me a ride home, I thought I'd get there in one piece."

"You will."

"One unbroken piece." Josh rested the coffee on his thigh. "But actually, I meant today was shit, not your driving."

"We closed a case—"

"Yeah, but that was overshadowed by DI Poole's visit and then you've been quiet ever since." Josh resumed staring at the side of Chad's face. "What's going on in that head of yours?"

"Nothing."

"I'd believe you if I couldn't hear the gears of it turning … and breaking apart."

Chad chewed his bottom lip.

"Come on, talk to me."

"The last few months, I've done my best to block Vincent out," Chad took a deep breath. "Tate, too, but I knew me and Vincent weren't done. There was always going to be consequences for breaking my promise."

"The guy is close to death—a month tops and he's falling through the trapdoor to hell. He can't do anything to you, Chad. If that was his best play to get you to see him, then he failed."

"Yeah, maybe." Chad flashed a glance in the mirror, hoping the pissed of motorist from earlier had gone, but his breath snagged in his throat when he spotted the red truck, two cars back from them.

"Hey, Josh … you see the red truck two behind us?"

Josh twisted in his seat. "Just about."

“Think you can read the plate.”

Josh hummed. “Speed up a little.”

Chad slammed his foot down on the gas.

“Jesus, Chad!” Josh clutched his seatbelt.

“Have you got the plate?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Josh said, typing it into his phone. He relaxed back into his seat. “I got the plate, why do you want it?”

“I think … I think that truck has been following me.”

Josh’s jaw dropped open. “Why is this the first time I’m hearing about it?”

“My therapist thought I was being paranoid, but there it is, following us.”

“I mean, it’s a red truck behind us … traveling the same direction.”

“Just call it in … and don’t flirt it up with Angel, I want to know who that truck belongs to this *century*.”

“You’re hilarious,” Josh said, holding his phone out, and pressing speaker. It only rang once. “Hey, Angel, it’s the devil here…”

“You are insufferable.” Chad muttered under his breath. He turned away to hide his smile. Angel had caught Josh’s eye when she transferred to Bardhum six months ago, but he’d never spoken to her one on one until after the whole being handcuffed to a bed by Olivia fiasco. Angel found it hilarious.

“I’ve got a plate that needs checking, you ready for it?”

“I’m always ready for you, my prince of darkness.” Angel purred.

Chad rolled his eyes. “Seriously?”

“Josh, are you on speaker?” Angel asked.

“No.” Josh replied, taking it off speaker and pressing the phone to his ear. “Registration F11 KEX.” He hummed looking at Chad. “So it’s insured and up to date on tax, great, and who’s the owner?”

Josh’s eyes widened. “Right.” He swallowed, “And her address?” He squeezed his coffee cup with his free hand, popping the lid clean off. “Thank you, Angel.”

He ended the call, and looked as if he was about to bite the phone.

“What is it?” Chad asked.

“That truck behind us belongs to Lucinda Hastings.”

“Hastings…”

“Yes, sister to Harriet,” Josh visibly gritted his teeth. “I mean it could be a coincidence…”

“We both know it’s not.” Chad turned into Josh’s road and pulled up beside his apartment. “What’s her address?”

“Nice try,” Josh smiled. “But you’re not going anywhere without me.”

“What?”

“You implied this woman is stalking you, and now you want to drive off to her farm to get murdered, well not on my watch.”

“She lives on a farm?”

“Damn,” Josh sighed. “I’m coming with you anyway.”

“Fine.” Chad said, swinging the car around to the sound of more car horns and yelled profanities.

“*Fine*,” Josh repeated. He glanced at his apartment out of the back window. “Just like that?”

“Yeah—”

“You’re not going to try to talk me out of it, you know, spare my life?”

Chad’s mouth twitched with a smile. “You want to join me getting murdered on her farm, then you can.”

Josh raised his eyebrow. “And I thought we were friends…”

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As soon as they caught up with the red truck, their conversation died. Josh crushed his coffee cup and shoved it in the side of his door.

Chad didn’t even chastise him, too focused on the truck trundling along, leading them deeper into the countryside.

Josh broke the silence. “I don’t like this.”

“We’re fine.”

They passed a signpost for Hastings Farm. The truck pulled up in front of a row of cottages, beside *another* red truck, and there they were—the Toyota and the Ford.

Two trucks.

Chad spied a barn on the horizon, roof sunken and sides wrapped in coils of green ivy. A tractor chugged away in a field in the distance.

“Okay?” Josh asked softly.

Chad nodded, switching his focus back to the truck in front of them. The door opened, and a woman slid out and turned to face them. Her hair was more white than blonde, and she raised her hand to wave at them. Her coat slid down showing her skinny wrist. She was a small, thin woman, and the slight smile to her lips appeared strained.

"Is our potential murderer waving at us?" Josh asked.

"It appears so," Chad said, opening his door.

The fields either side of them were green and yellow with long stalks swaying in the breeze. This farm—it was vibrant and active—it breathed life. His and Romeo's farm was barren, dark where magpies roamed, and bodies lay buried in the mud.

Their farm was death.

"Chad," Josh coughed. "You good?"

"Yep." He nodded, and approached the woman, heart drumming in his chest. Josh walked a pace behind.

"Lucinda Hastings?" Chad asked.

A prang of sadness hit her face. She looked away. "I prefer Lucy. The only person who called me Lucinda was my mother."

Chad nodded. "Lucy. You've been … following me."

She chuckled softly, resting a hand against her truck. "That makes it sound so sinister."

"Isn't it?"

"No," Her brow folded with deep lines. "I wanted to talk to you, but every time I saw you, I couldn't bring myself to. Once I waited outside the station for two hours, and when you came out you were smiling, so carefree, and I didn't want to ruin your day so I drove home, told myself to try again another day."

"This has been going on for weeks."

"I know," Lucy said softly.

Chad glanced over his shoulder to Josh, puffed out, doing his best to look menacing.

"What did you want to talk about?" Chad asked.

Before Lucy could reply, her gaze skipped from Chad to over his shoulder—over Josh's shoulder, too—fixing on a man heading down the slope of a field towards them. His boots squelched, and he wore a flat cap

and navy gilet over a brown shirt. A shotgun rested casually against his shoulder, pointing at the sky, as he clutched the stock with one hand.

"Fuck." Josh hissed, spinning around to face him. He spread his body wide, covering Chad.

The man trudging closer didn't spare them a glance. His eyes were fixed to his boots as he strode through thick mud to get to them. When he got close enough, he lifted his head, before removing his cap to reveal a mane of black hair. He paused, and shot them a weary look.

Chad flashed his badge, then Josh did the same.

"Officers," he said in greeting, before nodding to Lucy, "Ma, you okay?"

Lucy smiled. "I'm fine."

The man whistled, and four dogs appeared on the horizon, two collies and two Labradors.

"Double fuck." Josh shuffled backwards into Chad in full-on bodyguard mode.

The dogs ran down the slope each with a bird in their mouth. Their tails swished back and forth as they dropped the game at the man's feet.

"This is Andrew, one of my sons. Mac is on the tractor in the field," Lucy said, searching for him on the horizon, but he'd gone over the crest of the hill. "Sorry, where were we…"

"I wanted to know why you've been following me." Chad reminded her.

Andrew sighed before gesturing to one of the cottages. "Let me put this away," he lifted the gun, "then I'll come over to yours, Ma, and make coffees while you talk."

Lucy nodded, and Andrew strolled away. A whistle called the dogs with their spoils to his heels, and they followed him into one of the cottages.

There were five in a row each with a small, fenced garden out in the front. The one to the left looked the oldest with small windows and a low door. Paint had flaked from the door, and the small gate had a slat loose. The other cottages were built to look similar, in keeping with the cottage aesthetic, but the doors were bigger, and the windows were wider. Andrew disappeared into a modern one, not having to duck to get his six feet of height through the door frame.

“This way,” Lucy said, gesturing Chad towards her.

She went inside the middle cottage and held the door open for Chad and Josh. They removed their shoes and followed her into a snug living room. A fire crackled, and above it, photographs dotted the mantelpiece. Chad spotted Andrew with a brunette and a baby cradled in her arms. There was another man, too, with blond hair down to his shoulders, beaming at the camera.

“Mac,” Lucy said, pausing to stroke the photograph. She hovered her hand above one photo frame, not displayed like the others, but face down on the mantelpiece. Chad heard her swallow, then she passed it, sitting down on an oversized armchair.

She sunk down with a long sigh, then arranged a fluffy cushion. Her narrow fingers stroked through the strands.

Curiosity picked at Chad, leading him over to the faced down picture frame. “Can I?”

Lucy nodded and Chad propped it up. He already knew who’d be in that photograph. The quality didn’t match the other photographs, the colors were washed out, and a crease cut through the top, but there she was, Harriet Hastings, smiling brightly.

She was beautiful, with long glossy brown hair, and pretty dark eyes. Her smile pressed dimples into her cheeks.

“My older sister,” Lucy said softly. “Harriet. Please,” she gestured to the sofa opposite her chair, “sit down.”

Chad and Josh shared a look, then sat down on the sofa, moving the array of cushions to get comfortable. Josh’s knees pressed against the coffee table no matter how much he tried to shuffle back into the sofa. He opted for a side-saddle position, pointing his knees towards Chad’s legs.

Lucy continued to stroke her cushion, Chad searched and failed to find a conversation starter, leaving Josh to take the lead.

“What kind of farm are you?” he asked.

Lucy looked up. “My grandparents grew crops, wheat and rape seed mostly, and later my parents introduced the chickens … they wanted to add sheep. That’s what the barn on the hill was built for. Harriet was so looking forward to them, and to lambing—we both were, but…” she shook her head. “That never came to pass. Vincent Whitehall killed that dream, and

now it's just me and my sons who run the farm, barely breaking even each month."

"I'm sorry," Chad bit his lip. "About Harriet. Vincent Whitehall, he's a—"

"A puppeteer."

Chad frowned.

"Harriet's bedroom is untouched in the next cottage. All her trinkets and clothes exactly as they were, except covered in thick dust. My mom, Eileen, never gave up hope of Harriet walking back through the front door and picking up where she'd left off. I've … I've not gone in there since my mom died six months ago. Now her room is gathering dust, too."

The door slammed, and Chad shuffled to mask his jump. Andrew poked his head in the living room. He sifted his fingers through his hair, neatening the sweaty strands. "I'll be along with the coffee in a minute."

Lucy nodded. She closed her eyes and exhaled a long breath. Chad shared a look with Josh, then they waited. They waited for what felt like slow agonizing minutes for Lucy to reopen her eyes and speak. "I'm sorry, Chad, for following you. The truth is … I needed your help, but every time it came to asking for it, I just couldn't. I didn't want to involve you in this, but Vincent is pulling on the strings, and we're just the puppets on the end of them."

"The puppeteer."

"Yes."

"You've … visited Vincent?"

"No. He wrote to me. He knew … he knew how badly my mom wanted to find Harriet. He knew it plagued her every day, every thought. It tortured her, and I'm left wondering does it still torture her, even in death. Can she not find Harriet, if we can't find her here?" Lucy wiped away a stray tear. "Four weeks ago, I got a letter from Vincent. He told me how he's turned a corner, and he wants God to forgive him for his sins." She chuckled darkly. "I don't buy it, but he, and only he, knows the location of my sister, so I have no choice but to dance on these strings of his to find her."

Andrew interrupted, placing a tray down on the table. A coffee pot steamed, and Chad greedily inhaled the scent. Andrew made their coffee—

Lucy waved her hand dismissively when he asked her—then he made his own before perching on the arm of his mother's chair.

"I would've preferred it were just me Vincent wanted to play his games with," Lucy shook her head. "But there's two others he wants involved. You and—

"James Poole." Chad finished.

"Yes," Lucy tightened her fist into the cushion on her lap. "James Poole."

Josh knocked his foot into Chad's ankle. They'd both noticed the change in Lucy at the name, the spike of something angry, but she blinked it away.

"James came to see me today and explained the situation," Chad said, gaging Lucy's reaction. Her expression stayed blank.

Andrew lifted his coffee, staring at Chad over the rim. "And you said?"

"I told him I was sorry, but I don't want to be involved."

Andrew lowered his cup. "You are joking, right?"

"I'm not—"

"You only have to go to Wiltknot, talk to Vincent a bit, and maybe drive him around—"

"Stop it," Lucy snapped, she raised her hand to quiet her son. "Do not take this out on him."

Chad slid to the edge of the sofa and found Lucy's eyes. "If I truly believed Vincent would tell us where your sister is, I'd dance to whatever tune he wanted me to, but I don't believe it. I don't believe he's changed and wants forgiveness, and you said yourself you don't believe that either."

"I don't," Lucy agreed. "My mom's dying wish was to be reunited with Harriet. The space above her in her grave is for Harriet, and I know that if Vincent was serious about washing away his sins, he'd try to find Harriet with or without your or James's help, but he won't. But I have to leave that door open. If you're the one that shuts it, then so be it, you save me from whatever Vincent has planned, but I can't be the one to shut the door. I can't do that to my mother," she closed her eyes in a long blink before reopening them. They swam with tears. "Our mother."

"It's a game," Chad shook his head. "That's all it is to him, a game, and I'm not willing to play it because we have no idea what the rules to it

are, and he's the only one that knows how to win."

"I understand." The crease above her nose deepened. "I accept your decision."

Chad slumped.

"How … how did James take it when you said no?" Lucy asked.

"He was angry at first, then he pretty much begged me to reconsider."

Lucy snorted, averting her gaze. "That's his guilty conscious."

"Guilty—"

"It's his fault."

Chad blinked. It was his turn to clip Josh's ankle with his foot. He knew hardly anything about Vincent Whitehall, but Josh at least had the advantage of watching his documentary.

"Why is it his fault?" Josh asked.

Lucy narrowed her eyes on him. "Do you know anything about my sister's murder?"

Josh swallowed. "Only that Vincent wanted to keep her location to himself."

"James let my sister go." Lucy hissed.

Chad frowned. "Let her go. What does that mean?"

"He was with her that night."

"With your … sister."

"Yes. A twenty-eight-year-old married detective sergeant was with my seventeen-year-old sister. He gave her a warning for possession of an illegal substance or so he claims, then he let her go off in the dark on her own, knowing there was a serial killer preying on young women."

Chad pinched his brow. "What do you mean 'he claims'?"

"There was no written warning, no recordings back then. He claimed he searched Harriet, told her to get in the police car and gave her a verbal for a joint of marijuana before letting her go." She laughed without humor. "James Poole is the last person to see my sister alive and he is a damn liar."

Andrew set his coffee cup down and ran his hand up and down Lucy's back.

"Calm down, Ma,"

"I'm not saying Harriet was a saint," Lucy continued. "But she didn't smoke marijuana. She hated the stuff. She wasn't in his car getting a verbal warning, she was in there because that creep was obsessed with my sister."

Chad flashed a glance at Josh, then back to Lucy.

"But you know how it is," Lucy continued, "the police look after their own. At least they did back then. I'm hoping nowadays everyone is held accountable for their crimes equally, no special treatment because of a badge held in your pocket," She darted dark eyes between Chad and Josh. "I'd like to think I can trust you."

"You can." Chad replied.

She hummed. "My dad reported James's inappropriate behavior before Vincent killed her, but it was ignored, explained away."

"What kind of inappropriate behavior?"

"Gifts. Letters. He would wait outside our school and drive her *home*, but I'd still beat them on the bus. Who knows where he took her and what they did. It went on for months. Our dad was furious, and confronted him, told him to back off, but James didn't listen."

"Is your dad…"

"Still alive, yes," Lucy nodded. "He moved away soon after Vincent was caught, lives in Italy now. Him and my mother's relationship broke down … he tried to convince her to sell up, move away, but she lived and breathed in the past, imagining Harriet would come back to her, the same girl that left her that morning. She wouldn't accept she was truly gone, and my dad couldn't take the grief. He wanted to sell up, move away, but my mother didn't."

"Does he know about Vincent?"

"No. If we can recover Harriet, then I'll tell him, but this is between me, James, and Vincent."

"And me," Chad said softly.

"I know Vincent killed her, but as far as I'm concerned, James is just as guilty, and he knows it, too. I don't know what happened in his car that night, but he *knew* throwing her out of it afterwards was dangerous. It was dark. It was a long walk home, there was a killer on the loose and she was unlucky enough to accept a lift from Vincent Whitehall." She took a deep breath. "Rest easy, Chad. I won't follow you again, and I'm not angry at you, I envy you."

"Envy me?"

"That you have the strength to say no to him. I can't, and it doesn't look like James can either."

“Thank you,” Chad pressed his lips in a grim line. “Thank you for understanding.”

He placed his coffee cup back on the table, and Josh did the same. They both got to their feet, blurting out the customary, “Thank you for your time,” then left, Chad at a quicker pace than Josh who caught his arm outside and yanked him to a stop.

“You okay?” Josh asked.

“Not really,” Chad replied, glancing back. “I feel like shit.”

“That’s how Vincent wants you to feel.” Josh released Chad’s arm. “Don’t let him mess with your head, Chad. He’s messing with hers, and he’s messing with James’s, and he’s trying to mess with you, but you’re not letting him.” Josh lightly punched Chad’s shoulder. “You’re not letting him.”

Chad shot Josh a wavering smile. “It feels like I am.”

“He can’t do a goddamn thing to you if you just keep him out of here,” Josh tapped his temple. “Keep him out of there, and you win.”

Chad snorted. “Since when did you get so wise, huh?”

“I’ve always been wise, you’ve just not wanted to listen until now. Come on.” Josh gave Chad an encouraging push towards the car. “I was supposed to be eating nachos in my boxers and watching … watching….”

Chad frowned. “Yes?”

Josh dismissed him with a wave of his hand. “I just need to be home, things to do, that’s all…”

“Porn,” Chad muttered. “You were so going to say porn.”

Chapter Five

Chad cut the engine, opened his door before stopping dead. A prickle of awareness went through him. He slapped a hand to the hairs rising on the back of his neck as he eyed the house, but his sense of unease came from elsewhere.

It felt like eyes on him.

But there was no red truck behind him.

Feet hopped along the roof of the outhouse. Chad squinted, climbing out of the car. He stood on his tiptoes to get a good look at the bird, but it moved out of sight.

Chad slammed the door shut and locked the car. He stepped towards the house, only to stop again at the sound of growling.

Playful growling.

He trudged around the side of the house, only to stop in his tracks at the sight of Merc dashing around the muddy field. His playful growls were joined by another rumble from Romeo, not a noise Chad was used to hearing, but he labelled it as frustration.

A sweaty, mud-covered Romeo was a sight to behold, and Chad leaned against the side of the house and watched his failed attempts at catching Merc. He stifled a laugh when Romeo slipped and ended up on his knees.

“I’m gonna kill you!”

Romeo staggered back to his feet, only to yell his outrage at his mud-covered jeans. Chad couldn’t catch his second chuckle behind his hand in time.

Merc heard and bounded over with his tail swishing and a stolen tea towel swinging from his teeth.

He skidded to a stop, abandoned his newfound toy, and pressed muddy paw prints all over Chad’s suit trousers.

“Having fun?” Chad asked him.

He reached down and gave Merc a generous pat on the head.

Romeo stalked closer, still huffing and grumbling under his breath. His dark eyes stayed fixed on Merc as he came to a stop two meters from where Chad fussed their new companion.

“*Your* dog stole my tea towel.”

"*Our* dog." Chad corrected, leaning over to grab the offending item. The magpie tea-towel Chad despised. He snorted. "If anything, the mud and dog slobber has improved it."

"He's worse than vermin."

Chad pouted and looked down at Merc, a big smile on his face, and staring up at Chad with huge eyes, oblivious to the insult from his new master.

"I've had to chase him for it for the last twenty minutes."

"He thinks it's a game," Chad replied.

Romeo held his hand out for the towel. When Chad didn't immediately give it to him, he grunted and snapped his fingers. "That particular design is no longer available."

"What a shame."

"Precisely."

Chad smirked, taking a step closer to Romeo. He held the towel out. It trembled in his grip, and his heart began racing. At the last second, he snatched it back then threw it over his shoulder. Merc leaped off the ground to catch it and dashed away with his tail moving in a blur. He bolted for the still open kitchen door.

Romeo's expression darkened. His outstretched hand fell back to his side. "I can't believe you just did that."

Chad took a step away as Romeo took a menacing one forward.

He lifted his chin. "It makes a better dog toy."

"It's my tea towel."

"It's Merc's tug toy."

Romeo's nostrils flared. "You had hold of it, and instead of giving it back to me, you threw it to him."

Chad shrugged. "He's … more adorable, 5 letters."

Romeo raised his eyebrow. "He's not cuter than me."

"You don't have a waggly tail."

"I have other parts that you're very fond of. I suggest you apologize if you want to see them again."

Chad smiled. "Like you would keep them from me."

Romeo smirked. "Look," he gestured to his knees. "He ruined my jeans."

“Technically, you did. If you’d been a bit more careful when running around the field … well, you wouldn’t have fallen.”

Romeo’s cheeks reddened. The skin of his droopy eye twitched. “Is that you trying to be funny?”

“It’s me being honest.”

Merc poked his head out the kitchen door. He dropped the tea towel and barked.

“Little shit bag,” Romeo mumbled.

Chad patted his shoulder. “That makes you *big* shit bag.”

Merc barked again.

“I swear if he barks at us again, I’m going string him up with the chain in the outhouse.”

Merc growled, then barked.

Romeo ran at him but not before Chad tackled him around the middle and tried to pull him to a stop.

“Run, Merc!” Chad called.

Merc snatched the tea towel back into his mouth and disappeared into the house.

Chad slipped, and landed with a wet slap, half his face pressed into squelchy mud, but he couldn’t help his smile.

Romeo’s firm hands gripped onto his arms and rolled him onto his back. He straddled Chad’s chest, knees sinking into the mud, weight rendering Chad helpless. Romeo’s fingers curled around Chad’s wrists like shackles and drew them above his head.

“You got me,” Chad said.

He gazed up at Romeo, smiling, but the expression he got in return was blank, unmoved. Merc yapped for their attention somewhere behind him, but he didn’t look, too drawn to Romeo and the expression he couldn’t read.

Chad’s smile began to fade, before it could go out altogether, Romeo’s grew. Their smiles met somewhere in the middle, small, tentative until Romeo laughed.

A deep rumbly laugh that made Chad laugh, too, with giddiness and relief.

“You’re annoying, you know that?”

Chad tilted his chin up. “Yeah, but you love me anyway.”

“I do, God help me I do.”

“You got on God’s bad side a long time ago, don’t expect any favors.”

“You’ve turned your back on him, too.”

“For you. I’d turn my back on anyone for you.”

Romeo nodded. His expression turned serious. “I know…” Merc broke the moment by skidding into them, tossing the tea towel up in the air.

“I guess it’s just a tea towel.” Romeo sighed.

Chad nodded and tried to struggle up, but Romeo didn’t relent. “Precisely, *just* a tea towel.”

“It was my favorite, though.”

Chad tilted his head to Merc beside them, tea towel pinned by his paws, and teeth tearing off strips of material. Romeo didn’t look, nor did he flinch at the tears.

His sole focus stayed on Chad.

“I’m sure he didn’t mean it.” Chad whispered.

“Oh, I know he didn’t, he’s just a dog, but you … you gave it to him.” Romeo narrowed his eyes slightly. “You wanted to end up like this?”

Chad attempted a shrug. “So what if I did…”

Still squeezing Chad’s wrists above his head, Romeo leaned down and ran his mouth over Chad’s muddy cheek. “You like to play a dangerous game, don’t you, Mr. Fuller.”

Chad smirked. “Mr. Fuller? It’s *Detective* Fuller.”

Romeo kissed him hard. Muddied lips pressed against muddied lips. Chad breathed in the scent of wet earth, but when Romeo’s tongue brushed against him, he chased the taste, lifting his head from the dirt just to keep their mouths together, to part his lips, to have a little bit more.

Romeo broke the kiss and grinned down at him smugly. Chad scrunched up his face and attempted to wipe his mouth on his shoulder.

“You taste like sweat and dirt.”

“Does that mean you don’t want more?” Romeo asked.

Chad’s grimace faded. “I never said that.”

“You like the taste of sweat and dirt when it’s on me?”

“Yes,” Chad nodded, brushing their mouths together. “When it’s from you.”

Romeo's lips shifted against his, smiling at his victory before he pressed into Chad's mouth and pushed his head back to the mud.

He released his iron grip on Chad's wrists.

As soon as he was free, Chad tangled his fingers into Romeo's hair, clutching and releasing until he earned an impatient growl. Romeo pulled away, sitting back on his heels.

"I'm covered in dirt, and I need a shower," Romeo said. "You're coming with me."

"And Merc?"

"Is one hundred percent not allowed in the bathroom for the next thirty minutes."

Chad laughed, and let Romeo pull him to his feet.

Merc bounded over with the scraps of tea towel in his mouth and dropped them at Romeo's feet.

Romeo sighed, grabbing them.

Merc attached his big grey eyes to Romeo, panting up at him as Romeo relented and gave him a pat on the head.

Chad exhaled hard.

"Rough day?" Romeo asked.

"Yeah, but the last ten minutes has made up for it." He glanced down at his feet, then up at Romeo. "I love you so goddamn much."

Romeo smiled. *That* big smile fluttered Chad's stomach and squeezed his heart. If love had a *look*, Romeo had just attached it firmly to Chad, and he basked in it for a few moments.

"Come on." Romeo took his hand and pulled Chad over to the kitchen door. "If ten minutes rolling around in the mud has improved your day, imagine what thirty minutes in the shower with me will do to it."

Chad rested his cheek on Romeo's bicep as they trudged back to the house.

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Showered, and fed, Chad flopped onto his side, using Romeo's thigh as a cushion.

Chad dozed, half listening to Romeo's latest obsession, a Spanish crime drama about a detective solving impossible cases. He'd started the series to help with his language skills. Italian and French weren't enough—he'd added Spanish to the mix, too.

Chad knew it was a distraction. Romeo needed to keep his mind busy.

Unless Chad asked for them, he left the subtitles off, and Chad had to read the character's expression and music to understand what was going on.

He yawned, too tired to care about the current case plaguing the protagonist. Romeo would fill him in once the episode had finished anyway.

Merc clambered onto the sofa despite the loud tut from Romeo and laid down in front of Chad's chest. He wagged his tail every few minutes, beating it against the cushion like a drum, and making Chad chuckle.

"You miss me, huh?"

"Yes," Romeo replied, in a dead-pan voice. "I missed you."

"I was talking to Merc."

Romeo jabbed his fingers at Chad's neck until he squirmed and begged for mercy.

"So … was everything okay?" Chad asked.

Romeo paused the TV.

"If you mean did I try to kill your dog, no I did not."

"Our dog." Chad corrected, stroking a hand down Merc's spine.

Romeo rolled his eyes. "I spent most of my time in the outhouse, going over the cold cases, but his shrill whining got distracting, and I gave up."

"You need to give him attention."

"I had a better solution."

"Which was?"

"I taped his mouth shut."

Chad widened his eyes and rolled onto his back to glare at Romeo. "You did *what*?"

"I'm joking, Chad. Obviously."

"I don't think anything is obvious when it comes to you."

"Me and Mercutio got on fine, or as fine as we'll ever get on."

"I can drop him off at doggy day care. There's one not too far."

Romeo's eyes narrowed to slits. "Do you really think I'm incapable of looking after him?"

"No. Not incapable."

"We were fine. I walked him around the field. He likes … digging."

Chad smiled, "Yeah, I can imagine."

"No. I mean he likes digging, which might be a problem."

“Why?”

“He fetched me an arm.”

Chad sat bolt upright. “What?”

His stomach rolled, and when he glanced down at Merc, Merc lifted his head. His long tongue hung out as he panted, and Chad pictured the scene in his head—Merc bounding across the fields all gleeful and eager for praise with an arm in his mouth.

Romeo tilted his head, his eyes lost in thought. “I can’t tell whose it is.”

“What?”

“I’ll just have to guess and throw it in with one of them.”

One of them. The bodies in the field.

It had been over four months since their last kill. Graham Brennan. He killed his wife and her sister. Romeo hadn’t had much luck with the cold cases since, but he seemed in control.

“Please say you’re joking?”

Chad couldn’t shift the imagery of Merc holding a rotting arm from his head. Maggots and bones, with the stench of rot, dropping it at Romeo’s feet.

Romeo’s serious face cracked. “Of course, I’m joking.”

“Damn it, Romeo,” Chad clutched his chest. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“I’m trying to make you laugh.”

“That’s not the kind of thing I’d find funny.”

“I know that now, but I found it funny, and so did Mercutio.” He patted Merc on the head. “I walked him around the field, threw him a ball, found him a stick to chomp on, and looked up some treat recipes online.”

“That sounds … that sounds positive.”

“Believe it or not, I have been around dogs before, I just had no personal interest in owning one. He’s here now, and the least I can do is make sure he’s happy and entertained until you get home. You should have more faith in me.”

“Forgive me,” Chad lifted an eyebrow, “but I did come home to you growling and threatening to kill him.”

Romeo shrugged. “He enjoyed it.”

Chad settled back down on Romeo’s thigh.

“Why the rough day?” Romeo asked. “I thought it was an opened and closed case.”

“It was. Dave gave us his verdict and we spent the rest of the day doing paperwork.”

“So in what way was it rough?”

“I met my stalker.”

Romeo stiffened.

His disapproving stare burned the side of Chad’s face. Chad flipped onto his back, not shying away from Romeo’s anger.

“You know, the stalker that Keeley wasn’t sure existed—”

Romeo’s eye twitched. “The one you wouldn’t report…”

Chad sat up. “Yeah. No. It wasn’t like that. If I was wrong, it would be a red flag for my DI. He already thinks I’m on the brink of a breakdown after what happened with Tate.”

“But you weren’t wrong?” Romeo growled. “You were being stalked?”

“Not exactly. I did a check on the number plate of her truck and went to confront her.”

“Fuck, Chad,” Romeo flicked him hard on the temple. “Does this thing work in here?”

“Ouch,” Chad slapped his hand to the side of his head. “It works.”

“Really?”

“I didn’t go on my own. Josh was with me, and she wasn’t stalking me. She was following—”

“Sounds a lot like stalking to me.”

“She was following me because she wanted my help.”

Romeo rolled his eyes. “That damn detective in you can’t resist a damsel in distress, can he? Even if she leads him straight into a trap.”

“I said no. I said I couldn’t help her, and then we left. She’s not going to follow me again.”

“And you believe that?”

“Yes. I do.”

Romeo clenched his jaw. “What did she want help with?”

Chad shifted, sitting beside Romeo, he hunched forward. “Her name is Lucy Hastings, sister of the murdered Harriet Hastings. Vincent has said

he wants to wash away his sins before he dies and reveal the location of Harriet's remains."

"So why hasn't he?"

"Well, apparently his memory has nosedived in the last few weeks and he needs some help remembering what he did with her. Which is where Lucy, and James Poole come into it."

"James Poole?"

"A retired detective," Chad frowned. "According to Lucy he had some kind of relationship with Harriet—"

"What has this got to do with you?"

"Vincent isn't willing to cooperate with authorities unless I'm involved, too."

Romeo nodded. "No Chad. No Harriet."

"Something like that." Chad looked up at him. "I said no. I said no to both James and Lucy."

Chad expected the tension to drain from Romeo's shoulders, but it didn't.

"Lucy, she gets it," Chad continued. "She understands. James, less so, but he'll have to accept it. I'm not going back to Wiltknot. I refuse to be one of his puppets, dancing on strings to whatever he's got planned."

Romeo's green eyes darkened. His gaze lingered on Chad's face for a few moments, then he picked up the remote and restarted his program.

Chapter Six

"Vincent Whitehall."

The name pulled Chad from the kitchen into the living room. He stopped munching the slice of toast in his hand, and openly gawped at the TV.

"I said no, Romeo, I promise I said no."

Chad stared at the flashing banner on the bottom of the screen. *Breaking News from inside Wiltknot Maximum Security Prison, Vincent Whitehall has agreed to help specialized officers in their search for Harriet Hastings remains.*

The news studio cut to a reporter outside Wiltknot being jostled by other journalists as they tried and failed to talk over each other.

"Vincent Whitehall is said to be in a fragile state nearing the end of his life, but before he dies, he wants to give closure to the Hastings family."

Romeo expelled a long breath. "Looks like Vincent isn't accepting your no."

Chad perched on the arm of the sofa. The toast dropped from his numb fingers when he saw his own name alongside James's shooting across the bottom of the screen.

"It's been reported that the lead officers on the case are Detective Inspector James Poole and Detective Constable Chad Fuller."

"Fuck…"

Romeo hummed in agreement.

"Chad Fuller is, of course, the same one that had dealings with serial killers Romeo Knight and Marc Wilson, and more recently he was involved in the chloroform killings by Tate Bacon."

"Dealings with?" Chad muttered.

"He's going to make you dance, whether you want to or not."

Chad walked out, mumbling over his shoulder. "I need a drink."

He hurried back to the kitchen pursued by Romeo holding his dropped toast. Romeo threw the slice in the bin before turning to face Chad who had ignored the kettle and went to the cupboard with the whiskey bottles. He picked one at random, knowing he wouldn't taste anything but the burn in the back of his throat. Chad studied the label as he got himself together and turned around.

“No,” Romeo said firmly, grabbing the bottle out of Chad’s hand. “Won’t do you much good if you drive to work drunk and get yourself arrested.”

“I’m going to call in sick.”

Romeo shook his head. “You can’t.”

“But—”

“If you call in sick, guess where those journalists will turn up…”

Chad shifted his gaze to the window and the fields beyond.

“They’ll camp out here with their long lenses just to get a glimpse of you.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

Romeo rubbed his chin. “You let Vincent play his game.”

“You told me you didn’t want me to visit him, didn’t want him getting in my head—”

“And he won’t. We knew he wasn’t going to let it go. If anything, it surprised me he took so long to draw you in, but now he has.”

“You could at least pretend to me concerned about me.”

“I’m not.”

“Thanks.”

Romeo moved the bottle away from Chad’s lunge.

“I’m not concerned because you’ve got a secret weapon.”

Chad stared at him blankly.

Romeo sighed. “Me, Chad. You’ve got me. I won’t let anything happen to you, but in the spectrum of grey, you’re bang in the middle. You flit between lighter and darker, but you need to step towards the dark to see this one clearly, to see it like I can. Vincent is setting you up to lose—”

“That much is obvious.”

Romeo set the bottle aside. “He’s setting you up to lose with the eyes of the country watching. He’s seen your weakness—he saw it when you visited about Tate.”

“What weakness?”

“Your *need* for a result, your need to prove yourself to the public, and he’s giving you what you want, a goal that seems achievable, but we both know he’s not going to tell you where Harriet is.”

“Then how do I win?”

Romeo reached for Chad's shoulders, holding him in place. "By getting the result regardless."

"Romeo … you've lost me."

"You're going to prove what I've always suspected."

"Which is?"

"Vincent Whitehall *didn't* kill Harriet Hastings."

"What?" Chad's eyes widened. "Of course he did. He confessed."

"I don't think he did it. I have read about so many killers and there's something about this victim that stood out, something false."

"Jesus, Romeo, you're talking crazy right now."

"If we unravel the lies and find out what really happened to Harriet Hastings the night she went missing, we can cut Vincent Whitehall from his own game."

"I've already told James no."

"Then you need to call him back." Romeo glanced across the fields. "Because puppets don't get to choose whether they dance on strings or not, the puppeteer does, and Vincent's making you dance regardless."

****

Chad pressed his lips in a firm line. Exiting his car, he ignored the shouts and screamed questions of the journalists kept behind the barrier. The noise reared, battering his back in waves as he remained emotionless. He kept his stern detective face on until he was inside the station, then leaned against the wall, cursing under his breath.

Josh appeared from the corridor. "It's madness."

He held out a takeaway cup of coffee.

"Life saver," Chad smiled. "Didn't happen to add a shot to it did you?"

"Nope, but I'm pretty sure Angel has rum under her desk if you want some."

Chad shot him a coy smile. "And how would you know that?"

Josh blushed. "Rumors…"

Chad snorted.

Ally pushed inside the station, releasing a barrage of shouts and camera clicks until the door swung closed and sealed behind her.

"Vultures," she hissed. "Don't even think about it, Chad."

He looked away from her. "Think about what?"

“Going to see Vincent. It’s clear as day a power move. He’s never going to tell you where he’s scattered Harriet. Others have tried, and they’ve all failed. You were right to say no to James. Vincent is just trying to fuck with you.”

“It’s kind of worked.”

Ally’s mouth dropped open before snapping shut. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“I called James, agreed to go with him to Wiltknot.”

“Have you lost your mind?”

Josh smirked. “I’ve often wondered about tha—

“Shut your trap,” Ally pointed a finger at Josh but stared at Chad. “The DI will never allow it.”

Chad met her stare. “If I don’t go visit him, then I’ll be called an impassionate coward who doesn’t want to give a family closure and if I do visit, and can’t get a location, I’m a failure. I’m gonna lose either way, but at least one of them looks like I tried. I have to do this.”

“And just like that.” Ally clicked her fingers. “Vincent has pulled you in. I can see it in your eyes.”

Chad looked away. “See what?”

“You’re falling for it. You’re falling right into his trap and the worst thing about it is that you know you are.”

“I’m not falling into a trap—”

“Do you enjoy being toyed with by killers?”

Chad stumbled back. Josh sucked in a breath.

“What?” Chad asked.

She stood in front of him.

“Do you secretly like it?”

“Of course not!”

“Is it exciting? Does it make you feel special having their attention?”

Chad’s eyes burned, as did his lungs as he heaved for breath. The numbers carved on his skin tingled, reawakened at Ally’s taunt.

“Ally,” Josh hissed. “That’s completely uncalled for.”

“Do you really think that?” Chad narrowed his eyes. “Do you think I enjoyed everything that’s happened to me?”

“Sometimes I wonder.” Ally shrugged. “Maybe you get some kind of sick pleasure out of it.”

Josh tightened his hand around Chad's arm and tried to pull him away, but Chad rooted himself to the floor, meeting Ally's anger with his own.

"What the hell does that—"

"First Romeo, then Marc, now Vincent."

"Romeo and Marc took me against my will."

"But with Vincent, you're choosing to go back to him."

"I don't have much of a choice."

"Of course you do. You can say no."

"The public—"

"Will crucify you regardless. You've given yourself over to whatever sick game he's got planned and I'm starting to think you enjoy it—you can't function unless someone is trying to destroy you."

"Christ, Ally," Josh interrupted again. He gave Chad's arm a hard tug, but he resisted, not backing down from Ally's accusation.

"That's not fair," he snapped.

Josh murmured close to Chad's ear. "I think someone's got up on the wrong side of the bed."

"Keep quiet, Josh!" Ally turned her attention back to Chad. "You're addicted to being *tormented* and I've tried hard to be there for you."

"I know." Chad forced the words through his teeth. "You have been. You've been amazing—"

"But it's not going to make a difference in the end, is it?"

"What do you mean?"

Ally averted her gaze. She slumped and directed a sad sigh at her feet. "I can't save you, Chad."

"I don't need saving."

"You do, you just don't realize it."

"Ally—" Josh warned.

"You're gonna die at the hands of a serial killer, it's just a question of which one."

The doors opened again, releasing a fresh wave of white noise. James Poole strode over to them rubbing his hands together with a big grin on his face. He looked at them before glancing back over his shoulder.

"The public are certainly behind us."

“All until you fail them,” Ally said. “Vincent isn’t going to give you what you want. All that animal wants is power, control, and acknowledgement and you’ve stupidly agreed to give it back to him.” She shot a savage look Chad’s way. “Say no, Chad. Even if it costs you your job, say no.”

“I can’t,” Chad snapped. “I need this job, Ally. I *need* it.”

“Chad understands what you fail to,” James said, making a placating gesture towards Ally.

Ally’s nostrils flared. “Which is?”

“His duty is to serve the public, which means putting his own wants and ego aside and accepting the role assigned to him.”

James patted her shoulder. Chad winced at the grind of her teeth.

“Touch me again.” Ally hissed. “And I’ll break all your fingers.”

“DS Coulson.”

All of them jumped except James. The DI stood on the bottom step of the stairs, file tucked under his arm, with another officer beside him.

“I need you and Josh upstairs in the incident room.”

“What about Chad?” Josh asked.

The DI’s defeated gaze shifted to Chad. “I’m going to leave Chad in the superintendent’s hands.”

“Superintendent,” Josh muttered beneath his breath. “You really are screwed, Chad.”

Chad side eyed him. “Thanks for that.”

“Ally, Josh,” the DI said, gesturing to the stairs.

Ally eyeballed James whereas Josh’s sympathetic eyes found Chad’s.

The DI led them upstairs, and then they were gone.

The superintendent waited until the door to the incident room above had closed, before marching over with his hand out for Chad to shake. His grip was hard, and lingering, and his stare was the same. He was younger than James and the DI, but grey streaks peppered his hair and the wrinkles on his forehead were deep.

“I’m superintendent Peter Watts from Alborough police department.”

“Alborough.” Chad whispered, numbly.

“That’s right. As HMS Wiltknot is technically in our county, this investigation is being overseen by the Alborough department. You and DI Poole will report to me.”

The superintendent pulled his grey eyes from Chad and attached them to James. He held out his hand. James grabbed it with both of his. “So good to see you again, Pete.”

Pete.

“James.”

James continued to enthusiastically shake the superintendent’s hand. “I can’t wait to get started.”

The superintendent smiled. “No time like the present.” He glanced up the stairs. “I need to finalize Chad’s temporary transfer to Alborough, but there’s no reason you two can’t go on ahead.”

James released the superintendent’s hand to check his watch. “I said we’d be at Wiltknot as soon as we can.”

“Then I suggest you don’t waste any more time.”

Chad stiffened. By the pointed look he received, those words were not being aimed at James.

“Right,” Chad took a step away. “I’ll meet you over there—”

“No.” The superintendent’s gaze cut into him. “I want you to arrive together. Present a united front.”

He looked back at James. “Whatever you need to get the result, it’s yours.”

James nodded. “Come on, Chad. We better not keep Vincent waiting.”

****

The razor wire glinted on top of the tall fences. Chad knew Vincent was in no condition to stage a dramatic break out, scale the walls, vault the fences, and run off into night, but Wiltknot would never look secure enough for a man like him. It was a cage, inside a cage, inside a cage, and as they passed through the first gate, James turned to him.

“Your sergeant always that highly strung?”

Chad side-eyed him. “She’s worried about me.”

“Worried,” James barked a laugh. “You’re supposedly this seasoned detective who had survived two serial killers.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m invincible.”

“No,” James clicked his tongue. “It doesn’t. You were here not too long ago, right?”

“Right.” Chad agreed, gritting his teeth.

“Vincent helped you.”

Without Vincent Chad would've been too late to save Shawn. It was an uncomfortable truth that rolled Chad's stomach and curled his fingers into his knees.

"From what I read that boy would've died without Vincent," James continued. "He saved him."

"He killed Tate." Chad snapped.

"Tate killed himself."

"Tate would still be alive if he'd never spoken to Vincent."

"You don't know that."

"Vincent manipulated him. He messed with his head so much he killed people just to please him."

James sighed. "All I'm saying is, Vincent helped you. Is it so crazy to think he might want to help us now?"

Yes, Chad thought, but didn't say.

"We're meeting Lucy Hastings in reception," James's lip pulled with a sneer. "Unfortunately, she has to be involved."

"Why unfortunately?"

"All you need to know about Lucy Hastings is that she's a spiteful, bitter liar. Don't believe anything that comes out of her mouth."

The car slowed to a stop, and James flung his door open. He buttoned his suit jacket as he climbed out, and after a deep breath, Chad joined him.

Press vans and cameras on tripods were set up in the distance. They were too far away for the press to scream their questions, but they no doubt recorded every moment as James led the way into reception with his head held high, and his shoulders back.

Chad paused when he saw Lucy waiting for them in reception. She perched on a chair, biting her nails.

James passed her like she didn't exist, and Lucy didn't acknowledge his presence either.

She got to her feet and attached her red-rimmed eyes to Chad. "I'm sorry," she whispered, shaking her head. "I know you didn't want this, but Vincent is a man that will stoop low to get what he wants."

Her eyes flashed to the door, the fence, the press beyond it. Her hatred for them tightened her brow and flared her nostrils.

"You should be thanking them." James said, looking straight ahead as he was patted down.

“What?” Chad asked.

James shrugged. “They’re the reason you called me, right? Without Chad, Vincent stays silent. I know you and Harriet never got on—”

“Don’t you dare—”

“But I’m willing to put our past aside for Harriet’s sake.”

Lucy’s voice grew shrill. “He’s never going to tell us where she is.”

“How do you know that, huh?” James raised both eyebrows.

“I just *know*.”

“How?” James shouted. “How do you know!”

He slapped his hands on his hips, staring Lucy down until she tipped her chin to her chest and eyed the floor. He crowded over her, until Chad intervened, pushing himself between them. It didn’t matter that James was older—there was something menacing about him, some withheld rage, that seemed to weary him as he settled down again.

“Your turn, Chad.”

He startled, twisting to face the prison officer. She tapped her name badge and shot him a warm smile.

“It’s Lynn in case you forgot from last time.”

“I hadn’t forgotten. It’s nice to see you again.”

She chuckled. “Is it? Is it *nice*?”

“Well, I would’ve preferred to have seen you at a supermarket or something, you know, said hi and then we’d have engaged in small talk about the weather.”

“Maybe one day.” She laughed softly.

Chad dropped his phone, wallet, and keys in the tray she held out for him. She passed the tray back to the officer manning the reception desk, then gestured for Chad to spread his arms out. Lynn patted him down while a silence hung between Lucy and James.

“How is Vincent?” Chad asked.

Both Lucy and James looked over to await Lynn’s reply.

“Sick. He stopped eating, struggles to walk, and talking is painful for him. He’s confused, fragile, dare I say it, but *this* Vincent seems almost human.”

“How long does the doctor think he’s got left?” James asked.

“A week. Maybe two.”

James folded his arms. “Then let’s not waste any more time here. Let us see him.”

Lynn nodded.

The light above the door to the prison switched from red to green. Chad bit his lip as the lock crunched. Lynn went to open the door, but James got there first, swinging it open, and marching down the corridor. Lynn hurried to catch up with him, demanding he wait, leaving Chad behind with a pale Lucy.

“Lucy?” Chad asked.

She took a deep breath. “Sorry, I…”

“Don’t apologize. Take your time.”

“I’m about to see the monster that murdered my sister.” She blinked. “I’ve seen him before on TV and in books, but I’ve never … you know, looked him in the eye. I don’t know if I can, Chad.”

He reached for her hand and took hold of her fingers.

“He tortured my sister to death, and afterwards he hacked her into pieces, and hid her where no one has been able to find her.”

“You don’t have to go in there. You don’t have—”

“I do. It was selfish of me, but I was glad you said no to him. It meant I didn’t have to pull on this thread either, but now, I can’t be the one to grind this investigation to a stop.” She swallowed. “I’ve got to do this. For mom, and for my dad. He’s on a flight right now, desperate to find Harriet, too. I’ve got to do it for my family.”

Lucy pulled her fingers from Chad’s hold and staggered through the open doorway. James waited at the end of the corridor with Lynn, tapping a hole into the floor with his shoe.

“Stalling for time, Lucy?” he asked.

Lucy didn’t respond to him. Her eyes were fixed on Lynn who asked in a soft voice if she was ready to go inside.

“Yes. I want to see him.” Lucy replied.

Lynn unlocked the door to visiting room one, then used her body to block James from pushing in first. Lucy took a deep breath and stepped inside. She paused in the doorway, much to James’s fury, who cursed at her and hissed that finding Harriet was time sensitive.

Vincent, like last time Chad visited, was already seated behind the glass. Unlike last time, Vincent’s eyes didn’t snap to Chad and take him in.

He stared without focus, not looking at any of them. He'd lost weight, which seemed an impossibility to Chad after seeing how frail he looked the first time he visited, but Vincent looked more skeleton than man. Chad understood what Lynn had meant when she said this Vincent looked more human. Skin and bones, a hint of *human*, but it was still more than months ago.

His complexion had taken on a greying tint, and the bags beneath his eyes were so dark and deep they looked like bruises. A tube fed oxygen up his nose, and an array of tubes ran into an IV line taped to his wrist. The skin around had bruised—purple blotches spread down to his nail-less fingers, and up to his elbow where the skin sagged off his arms.

Vincent's lips were firmly pressed together, but Chad still heard him wheezing as the oxygen tank kept by his side in the wheelchair hissed. A blanket had been tucked around him, but had fallen from one bare shoulder onto his lap exposing the sunken top of his chest. He looked like he had *hours* left, not weeks.

James hurried past a creeping closer Lucy and sat down in the furthest chair from the door. Lucy picked the chair closest to the escape, leaving Chad in the middle, directly in the path of Vincent's vacant stare.

He sat down, expecting Vincent's eyes to snap into focus, but they stared through him at nothing, chilling Chad to the bone.

"It's nice to see you again, James." Vincent said, still staring through Chad. "And the first time seeing you, dear Lucy. It's a pleasure."

Lucy caught a tear on her lashes, sweeping it away in the hope Vincent wouldn't see, but he stayed looking toward Chad.

"And Detective Fuller, I've finally got you here, haven't I?"

Chad didn't rise to the bait.

"You know why we're here," James started.

Vincent raised his hand, quieting him. His hand trembled, his arm shook, and he didn't have the strength to hold it up for long. "Of course I know, I was the one that asked for you. You three. Father Daniels told me if we confess our sins, the lord will be faithful, just, and will forgive us our righteousness."

"Yes," James nodded. "That's the reason we—"

"Will you confess your sins?" Vincent asked. He looked at them each in turn. "I'd love to hear them."

“I don’t have any sins—”

“Really?” Vincent no longer had any eyebrows, but his brow lifted. “None at all. What about you, Lucy? And we can’t forget Chad—”

“Enough,” Chad snapped. “Enough games.”

“I’m so happy you’ve found your voice again, Chad. It’s a voice I thought about often over the last few months.”

“You want this … forgiveness.” Chad prompted.

“Oh, yes. I have admitted my sins. I’ve admitted murder. I’ve admitted mutilation. I’ve admitted disposal of my victims.”

“But not the resting place of Harriet,” James growled. “That’s still a sin, an injustice that needs to be fixed.”

Vincent cocked his head. “*Places*.”

“What?”

“Resting *places*.”

Lucy sniffed, wiping her fingers beneath her nose.

Chad resisted the urge to bounce his leg on the floor.

“We’re here for the same reason, are we not?” Vincent whispered. “To find Harriet. And as much as you may despise me and question my motives, that’s all I want. She deserves to be found.”

Tears rolled down Lucy’s cheeks. Vincent looked at her, and she nodded before swiping them away.

“The other victims,” James said somberly. “When you disposed of them, you chose different locations, never used the same one twice.”

“That’s right.”

“So Harriet, she’s somewhere you didn’t use before or after.”

Vincent nodded. “That seems like an educated assumption.”

“All your victims came from the county of Bardhum, but you didn’t always dispose of them in the same county, sometimes you drove them hundreds of miles away from where the murders took place.”

“Also correct.”

James shuffled. “What I’m asking is … what’s our search area? How far did you go?”

“I can’t remember, but my gut tells me I didn’t venture out of Bardhum with Harriet. Something tells me she’s close.”

James unbuttoned his jacket. He reached inside and pulled out a photograph. Lucy sniffed louder, wiping snot on the sleeve of her coat.

“Don’t show him.”

James ignored her and pressed the photograph to the glass. “Do you remember what she looked like?”

Vincent’s gaze slid to the photograph. He looked at it a long time, then croaked out, “She was beautiful.”

“Yes,” James agreed, nodding. “She was.”

“They were all beautiful. That’s why I chose them.”

Lucy sobbed. James turned to her, pushing out his chest. “Cut it out, will you!”

His neck strained with the shout. Lucy turned away from him.

Lynn waiting in the doorway rushed over and pulled Lucy into a hug. James shook his head, and muttered, “unbelievable” under his breath.

Chad watched as Lynn switched between chastising James with evil glares and comforting Lucy with sympathetic eyes.

His breath caught. He could feel Vincent looking at him.

“The drugs they’ve got me on. They make it harder for me to remember, sometimes my memories are so vague, so out focus, that I begin to wonder…”

“Wonder what?” Chad asked.

“Whether they’re real at all. But other things, I do remember, with crystal clarity.”

“Like what?” James asked.

“Like broken promises.”

Chad’s heart began to thump.

Lucy’s chair scraped against the floor as she got to her feet to leave. James protested loudly, going from angry to pleading in a second, but Chad ignored both in favor of Vincent. He tried to read the message in his eye. The warning.

Because there was one, a promise of something.

Vincent looked away, severing their connection.

“Sorry, officers, Lucinda, but that’s all I’m up for right now. I need to rest.”

He fumbled with something beneath his blanket, then the door at his back opened and a nurse came into the room. She didn’t look anyone in the eye as she whisked Vincent away.

Chad caught the smile on Vincent’s lip as he turned from them.

A devil’s smile.

Chapter Seven

James ground his teeth together, insisting he and Chad wait for another ten minutes. Lucy had left with Lynn's arm around her shoulders, sobbing softly into her hands.

"We can't go outside yet," James muttered. "If we go out now everyone will assume we got nothing."

"We did get nothing."

James had been too busy unleashing his frustrations on Lucy to notice Vincent's focus change to laser intensity, zeroing in on Chad.

"What the hell was he on about? Broken promises?"

Chad bit his tongue.

The door opened on a red cheeked Lynn. She glowered at James. "I hope you're happy with yourself. That woman is in bits."

"You don't know anything about *that* woman."

"Vincent isn't coming back any time soon," Lynn pinned the door open with her foot. "There's no reason for you to stay."

"There's every reason. If we walk out of here now, every news channel will replay footage of us leaving fifteen minutes after stepping inside. It won't look good."

"Lucy has gone home."

"What?" James sprung to his feet, before wincing, and slapping his hand to his lower back. "What do you mean she's gone?"

"I mean, I gave the poor woman her stuff back and let her go. You may be a seasoned detective and used to confronting men like Vincent, but she isn't. That man murdered her sister, and you showed him a picture of Harriet without warning her—"

"To jog his memory. That's why we're here," James said. He'd placed the photograph face down on the table after Vincent had left, but picked it up, and looked down at Harriet. His hand shook, and Chad realized it wasn't a photograph he held, but a poster with a black and white printed picture of Harriet.

He'd only caught a glimpse of it when James had pressed it against the glass, but now he could see it, folded over, Harriet's picture on one side, and a description of her on the other. Stains and tears marred the page, and the thick crease line where James had folded it teased breaking in two.

James slipped it back into his breast pocket without a word.

"Beautiful." Chad whispered.

"She was," James nodded. "So beautiful. Lucy was jealous of that. The attention Harriet got."

"Attention from you?"

James gave him a hard look, then walked out. Lynn held her breath as he passed, before letting it out in a slow sigh.

"Charming, that one." Lynn muttered.

Chad got to his feet, tucked all three chairs beneath the table, then left. Lynn locked the door behind him.

"How long have you worked here?" Chad asked.

"Ten years."

"And has Vincent ever mentioned Harriet to you in that time?"

Lynn shook her head. "Not once."

Romeo's voice kept floating through his head.

Vincent Whitehall didn't kill Harriet Hastings.

"Do you think you could so something for me?"

"Depends on what it is?"

"Can you compile me a list of all Vincent's visitors, all his contacts, phone and address."

Lynn looked away. "I could try."

"Try?"

"The system has just been updated from paper to electronic, it's all a bit of a mess. It … it might take some time."

"Time is something I don't have."

Lynn nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you," Chad said before jogging outside to catch up with James. Chad caught up with him, frowning at the over-the-top smile he received.

"At least make it seem positive," James hissed.

Chad climbed into the passenger side refusing to smile and bob his head like a puppet. They drove in silence back to the station, but James kept the fake smile plastered on his face, just in case a journalist sneaked a picture of their car.

"As soon as Vincent is ready to talk again, we're going back there." James shot him a glare. "Doesn't matter what time of day or night. You will

be there, Chad."

"Thanks for the ride back to Bardhum." Chad said, before climbing out of the car.

Voices hurled questions in his direction, but there were fewer than when he'd first arrived at the station that morning. Chad hurried inside, jogged up the steps to the incident room and strolled inside with his eyes locked on the DI's office. Josh and Ally weren't there, but Faye looked up from her desk. Her jaw hung as she thought of something to say, but Chad didn't give her a chance to recover.

He strode straight into the DI's office without knocking.

The DI jumped in his seat, dropping his file into his lap.

"Chad—"

"I need everything we have on the Whitehall murders."

"What?"

"I'm not happy with this … arrangement, but the least I can do is be prepared. I need your help on this."

"I don't know if it's wise for you to pull on this thread…"

"Why?"

The DI's face scrunched. "There are things…"

"What things?"

"Chad…"

The DI glanced out of his office window. Faye watched them, picking nervously at her lip.

"Tell me."

"I can't."

The DI's eyes darted back and forth across the desk. "Look, I'll get you what I can from the archive, but I can't get you everything…"

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Chad flipped the lid of the trunk and grabbed the first shoe box of folders. He opened the front door with his elbow before depositing the box on the floor. Merc waggled out from the kitchen, beaming a smile.

Chad gave him a quick pat on the head, then went out for the next lot of boxes. The DI had given him a trolley full of folders and files about the Whitehall Murders.

Romeo folded his arms, watching from the kitchen doorway. Merc sat at his feet, tilting his head as Chad heaved for breath, bracing against the

stack.

"What happened?" Romeo asked.

"Not much. Vincent felt unwell and had to leave, but he mentioned the promise I broke."

"And these are…" Romeo nodded towards the leaning tower.

"Files relating to the Whitehall murders, and that big thick red folder," Chad gestured to the one sandwiched between the boxes. It was the only red folder, the rest were beige. "Is all documentation relating to Harriet's disappearance."

Romeo nodded. "That's a lot to go through."

"I'm sure we can handle it."

"We?"

Chad looked over to him. A slow smile spread Romeo's lips. His eyes crinkled, as he repeated a softer, "we" beneath his breath.

"You don't think Vincent killed her, so first things first, you've got to convince me he didn't. Then we find out who did."

Chad patted the pile.

"I like the sound of this *we*." Romeo nodded. He absentmindedly reached down to stroke Merc on the head.

"Since I've now been assigned to the reopening of the Whitehall case there's no need for me to drive into the station every day. I'm only needed when Vincent is well enough to talk to us or the superintendent summons me to Alborough, and the rest of the time I'm free to do research at home as long as I keep James in the loop."

Romeo's smile grew impossibly bigger.

"And I want to start as soon as possible."

"After dinner."

Chad opened his mouth to protest, but Romeo cut in, "I'm not taking no for an answer. We eat first, then we find this killer. Together."

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"These are facts," Chad started gesturing to the Vincent on the whiteboard. "Harriet Hastings went missing on the 18th of April 1983. The last person to see her alive—"

"Other than the killer," Romeo interrupted with a smug smile.

Chad rolled his eyes. “Other than the killer, is James Poole, who cautioned Harriet in his police car for possession of class B drug beside Melbourn Spring. He let her go and observed her walking down the A503 which is in the direction of her home, Hastings Farm.”

“It’s a three mile walk from Melbourn Spring.” Romeo mumbled. “A bit presumptuous to assume she was walking home, don’t you think?”

“Where do you think she was going?”

Romeo shrugged, and Chad continued.

“Harriet was reported missing the next day by her father at 12:30. He believed Harriet was staying with a friend that night which wasn’t uncommon and only when he called to see what time she’d be home for lunch, did he find out she wasn’t there.”

“Who was on the farm at the time?”

“Lucy and Michael, their father. Eileen was away visiting her sister that night. Both Michael and Eileen made a public appeal for information on their daughter’s whereabouts at 2:00 PM. Nine months later, at 1:00 PM on December 11th 1983, Vincent was arrested on suspicion of murder after an alleged victim escaped his home. He admitted to nine murders, including Harriet’s, and was able to give detectives a timeline of his crimes.” Chad gestured to the red folder. “Harriet is victim number seven, murdered one month after Kelly Price and four months before Trisha Link. Vincent claimed he was driving along the A503 when he saw Harriet walking in the opposite direction. He turned around, drove up behind her and offered her a lift home. She accepted.”

Romeo tutted. “Knowing there was an active serial killer on the loose.”

“Comments at this time are unnecessary,” Chad said, raising his eyebrow. “And irritating.”

Romeo mimed zipping his mouth shut.

“Vincent claims to have suffocated her in his car before driving her back to his house to perform his ritualistic dissections, ending in mutilation, just like his other victims. Blood was found in his van, said to be Harriet’s.”

Romeo snorted. Chad raised his eyebrow in warning, and Romeo lifted his hands in surrender.

“No piece or parts of Harriet have ever been discovered, with Vincent stating no one had been *lucky* enough to find her yet. Harriet is special according to him, hidden away for only him to uncover if he so chooses.”

“And now that he’s dying, he’s claiming it’s about time to reveal her hiding place or places, but there’s a catch… Vincent’s flagging memory and a limit on his heartbeats.” Romeo hummed. “He’s making a spectacle out of his crimes right to the end. A true professional.”

“A professional … serial killer?”

Romeo nodded. “Have you finished?”

Chad glanced at the whiteboard. It only had three print outs. One black and white image of Harriet, Vincent Whitehall’s grainy, washed-out mugshot, and a picture of James Poole taken from his social media page.

“Yeah … for now.”

Romeo shot to his feet and gestured to his chair. “Sit.”

Chad said down, frowning as Romeo brimmed over with energy. It vibrated through him.

“When you work with the facts, you only see half of the picture.”

“They’re backed up by evidence. That’s what gets a conviction—”

“Hey,” Romeo wagged a finger. “No interruptions, please.”

Chad folded his arms and leaned back in the chair.

“Strip this disappearance back and what do you *know*. Harriet didn’t arrive home. That is the only fact you have. The rest comes from Vincent, caught nine months later, he admits to killing her. Vincent, who, thanks to the public appeal, knew the time of Harriet’s last sighting, what road she was walking along and what she looked like.”

Chad’s frown tightened as he thought back to James’s poster. All the information had been there. Slim build. Five foot six. Long brown hair. Brown eyes. Pearl drop necklace. Red coat. Walking along the A503.

“The blood in his van.” Chad said.

Romeo eyes shone. “He said some of it was Harriet’s, but no tests were done. DNA testing on blood as we know it began in 1985, Harriet was supposedly killed in ‘83. No tests were done. There’s no proof any of it was hers.”

“There’s no proof it *wasn’t* either.”

“From what I read, Vincent has a meticulous eye for detail. He lives and breathes his kills when he retells them from the smells to the sounds. I

understand the need for that recollection."

Chad looked away.

"The need to see and smell and taste, and feel it all over again. Of course, merely thinking about it never scratches the itch, it circles it, makes it worse…"

Chad looked up, only to regret it when Romeo held his hands out in front of himself and curled his fingers. Romeo swallowed hard, staring at his hands.

"Even now, I remember the details, and I always found it curious that Vincent could recall such interesting things about the other women, but not this one. He was vague, and he hid the vagueness behind this idea Harriet was special to him because no one had discovered her yet, but I think that vagueness comes from him having no idea where she is. He's taken responsibly for someone else, or for an accident, or possibly even Harriet deciding to leave herself."

"I can't prove he had nothing to do with her disappearance from the lack of detail in his testimony. He, an active serial killer targeting young women, admitted to her murder. I need something concrete to prove he didn't do it. I need the killer, or I need proof that Harriet is alive."

"Then we'd better get started."

Romeo glanced over to the stack of boxes Chad had moved from the hallway into the outhouse. He stroked his fingers, eyeing the boxes. "I'm half tempted to dive right in and read Harriet's file first, but something tells me we need to start from the beginning. We need to start from his first victim, Debbie Ark."

Chad grimaced at the almost bounce in Romeo's step as he took off across the room to grab the first box. He flipped the lid, sorted through the folders before selecting one labeled transcribes.

He returned to Chad and squeezed his shoulder.

"Transcribes of the interviews," Romeo said. "We could read them if you like, role play, you can be the detectives conducting the interview and I can be Vincent."

"No, thanks," Chad said, taking the file from his hand. He flipped it open.

The two detectives leading the case were DI Mathews and DI Sterling. Chad knew they were both deceased. The date of the interview

was at the top, the 13th of December 1983, and the time, 1400, was next to it. Vincent Whitehall was named as the accused.

Vincent had declined a lawyer, and before Mathews had even asked a question, Vincent interrupted.

'*When Debbie tapped on my window asking for help from Mr. Whitehall, I couldn't stop myself…'*

Chapter Eight

Visiting Keeley that Saturday came as a relief. Never in a million years did Chad think he'd be happy to wait an extra thirty minutes in the waiting room to be seen, but the break from Vincent's files was worth it.

Romeo appeared nonchalant, completely unaffected as Vincent recounted nuzzling his face into open chest cavities, and excitedly hiding bits of body in the woods for school kids to find. The sheer amount of detail grew a nausea in Chad he'd been unable to shift at home.

He'd needed to get out of there.

Merc sat at his side, wagging his tail whenever someone walked in or out of reception. Pam, the receptionist, kept sitting up straight in her chair to steal glances at Merc over the counter, but she'd not ventured away from the computer she frantically tapped at to say hello.

"He's friendly," he said, just in case that was the reason.

Pam sat up straight again. She blew her fringe out of her eyes with a puff. "And I want to come fuss him, but this damn thing."

She smacked the keyboard.

"You any good with computers?" she asked.

Chad shook his head. "Sorry, that's not my department."

"Chad." Keeley called from the corridor. She shot a fleeting smile at Chad before crouching down and cooing at Merc dragging Chad towards her. Keeley had okayed him in their session and stroked him with obvious enthusiasm

"This is him?"

"Yep. Keeley meet Merc."

Keeley raised her eyebrow. "Funny, you never struck me as a car enthusiast."

Chad forced a smile, shrugging.

"Come inside," Keeley said, leading the way to her office. Merc tugged on the lead the whole way then jumped up on the couch.

Keeley widened her eyes.

"Sorry," Chad itched the back of his neck. "He's a sofa dog."

"It's fine, Chad." Keeley sat down behind her desk. "I've actually got something for him."

"Yeah?"

Keeley opened her drawer and pulled out a rawhide bone. Merc's ears pricked, and his nose worked overtime, sniffing the air. He dropped down from the couch and struggled until Chad unclipped his collar.

"If he's allowed it?" Keeley asked.

"Sure."

Keeley petted Merc on the head as she handed him the chew. Chad expected Merc to waddle back over to the couch, but instead he curled up on the floor by Keeley's desk and began chomping.

"He's lovely, Chad." Keeley said, admiring Merc.

"He is, but he has a weak spot for shoelaces." He gestured to the trainers he wore, absent of any.

Keeley laughed. It soon faded, and the joy in her gaze turned sympathetic. Chad knew her thoughts had gone from Merc to the shitshow of Chad's life the past week.

"How are you?"

"As good as can be expected. I knew Vincent wasn't done with me yet, and here I am, being forced to see him after *choosing* not to."

"You've been put in an impossible situation." Keeley pressed her lips in a grim line. "It's important you don't close yourself off to the people that love you."

"What if they close themselves off to me?"

"Has something happened with Frank?"

Chad waved his hand, dismissing Keeley's assumption. "No, he's been supportive, maybe *too* supportive."

He pictured a beaming Romeo picking up the next file of horrors. Before Keeley could ask what Chad meant, he jumped in again. "It's Ally."

"Your sergeant."

"Yes, she's my sergeant, but more than that she's my friend. We had a disagreement about this Vincent situation."

He breathed deep, taking in the scent of coffee, leather, and books. At some point, that unique smell had become a comfort to him. In these four walls some of his secrets were allowed out, not all of them, and never the biggest ones, but personal secrets about what went on in his head. Ocean sounds were playing from the bookcase, far too soft for the topic he inched towards.

"I imagine she's particularly worried."

“Her way of expressing worry is to go on the attack, and she said something that struck a chord. I’ve tried to forget about it, and even reached out and texted her to make peace, but she told me,” Chad shifted his jaw from left to right, “she said she needs space from me, and she wants no contact between us while I work on the Whitehall case.”

He picked his nails and looked towards the window.

“I didn’t think her … rejection would hurt as much as it does, but I feel like I’ve lost a good friend.”

Now the words were out, he shriveled at how pathetic he sounded. He’d lost a friend. Big deal. He was an adult for Christ’s sake.

“Would you like to tell me what the argument was about?” She caught his eye. “If you can tell me.”

He couldn’t discuss cases with her, Keeley knew. Vincent was out of bounds, but Ally’s accusations weren’t.

“She asked me whether I enjoyed being toyed with by serial killers.” He swallowed. “She seems to think I do, and get some sick pleasure out of being their plaything.”

Keeley didn’t press, she waited, and Chad sighed and finished the last of the accusation, “She doesn’t think I can function unless someone is trying to destroy me and thinks I’m addicted to being tormented.”

“And what do you think?”

“She’s wrong.” His voice came out shriller than expected. He dropped his head into his hands and mumbled at the floor. “At least that’s what I thought at first—that was my immediate reaction—but now I’ve had a few days to think about it, and…”

“And?”

“I keep finding myself in these situations, where a killer has power over me. Where my sanity is at stake, but at the last second, I manage to keep hold of it, keep hold of *me*.” He shook his head. “And that is addicting, it feels like winning, not just the case, but … I’m winning *me*. I tease a fall but save myself at the last second. Perhaps Ally is right. At some point in my life, I’ve decided being tormented and surviving is better than having a comfortable time living.”

“Decided … or learned?”

“What’s the difference?”

“The countless rejections from your mother, but still desperate for a relationship with her. Would you call that torment?”

Chad nodded. “I think I would.”

“It’s a learned behavior. You learned it from a young age, to desire attention from a bad person, who offers no warmth or safety. Serial killers are the extreme of that, maybe that’s why you struggle to keep your distance.”

“How do I unlearn it?”

“You interrupt the cycle. You take yourself out of the situation, develop different habits.”

“That’s a little difficult at the moment.”

Keeley snorted. “I guess it would be in your line of work.”

“I have more than enough money to stop working. I could go anywhere, find a place where no one knows me, and do something else, and live my life without suspicious glances, whispers behind hands, and serial killers seeing me as a conquest to destroy. But I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I thought it was because I wanted to lock up bad people.” He smirked. “Like I was a hero, arresting the serial killers, making sure they couldn’t hurt anyone else, giving closure to the families, reassuring the community that good triumphs over evil, eventually, but that’s just what I told myself. The real and only reason is that I enjoy working against them. I enjoy the struggle.” He shook his head. “The good, the bad, and the ugly parts. I want to beat them, despite how close I come to losing myself. Does that mean Ally is right? Do I enjoy being tormented by serial killers?”

“If we imagine for a second, that Ally is indeed right, and you’re addicted to being tormented, that doesn’t mean you enjoy it. Think about other addictions, Chad. It might begin as love, then turn into a love-hate, then desperate hate you’re unable to escape from. Does the despair you’re currently feeling stem from the idea of being addicted to torment at the hands of serial killers, or Ally’s assumption that you *enjoy* it.”

“That I enjoy it.” Chad shuffled and gestured to his chest. The numbers were hidden by his t-shirt, but he knew Keeley would understand. “I didn’t enjoy what Marc did to me. I couldn’t get out of that situation. I couldn’t save myself; It was Romeo that put a stop to it.”

Keeley's brow pinched in sympathy. "You still see Romeo as the hero in that situation, but you must know by now it isn't true. Excuse the pun, but he was never your *knight* in shining armor, Chad. He intended to kill Marc, not to save you."

He avoided her gaze. "I know that, but even so, he put a stop to Marc hurting me. I wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for him. Coincidence or not, he did save me, in the physical sense at least."

"Not in the psychological sense?"

"I'm still," he tilted his hand, "not exactly on stable ground, but I know for certain I didn't get any kind of sick pleasure from what Marc did to me."

"Was she angry?"

"Huh?"

Keeley leaned forward and looked into his eyes. "The argument—was Ally angry?"

Chad nodded. "Yeah, she was mad. She didn't want me to be involved in finding Harriet."

"People say things they don't mean when they're angry. They lash out, especially when they're scared or they're concerned."

Chad took a deep breath. "She replied to my message and told me not to contact her until this case is over." He bit his lip. "She's cut me off."

Keeley averted her gaze, and that hit Chad hard. They didn't speak. The audio track changed from a gentle sea to the patter of rain.

"Not all friendships last." Keeley whispered.

His mind went back to Gareth, once his best friend. They hadn't spoken in almost three years. They'd been close once. A long time ago. Close enough for Chad to ask him to be his best man.

"I know."

"And sometimes it's better to let go of these friendships, let go of that reliance, and that safety net, especially when they become detrimental to our health."

"I don't want to let go of Ally. She's good for me. I need her."

"I know how much you value your friendship—"

His thoughts trailed off as a damning realization took over. "Wait…"

"What is it?"

“She wants to let go of me.” Chad’s eyebrows scrunched together. His heart thumped. He glanced at Keeley for help. “I’m the one who’s detrimental. That’s what you mean, isn’t it? Ally needs to let *me* go for her to be happy.”

“That is not what I said. She hasn’t closed the door on you. She specified while you’re involved with Vincent she wants no contact, but after __”

“What if she realizes she’s better off without me?”

“The best thing you can do is give Ally some space and concentrate on your other relationships. With Frank, and Josh.”

He nodded, somberly. “I’m seeing Josh after our session.”

Keeley smiled. “No doubt he wants to meet Merc.”

“Yeah,” Chad laughed softly. “He’s been texting me every day for pictures of him.”

Keeley stood up and stepped across the room to the kettle. “Do you think you’ve made him dog broody?”

“One hundred percent. I’m half convinced he’s going to stage a kidnapping at the park and take Merc home with him.”

Chad fiddled with his fingers.

“What is it?” Keeley asked.

“There’s something else Ally said that’s been on my mind.”

Keeley flashed enough fleeting glances at the mugs to make the coffees, but most of her attention lingered on Chad. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He nodded, earning him another cautious smile from Keeley. Chad waited for her to prompt him.

“What did she say?”

“She said I’m going to die at the hands of a serial killer, it’s just a question of which one.”

Keeley’s eyes widened.

Chad nodded. “And … I know it’s crazy, but something inside me thinks the same. And it doesn’t have to be they physically do it, what if one drives me over the edge.”

The mug shook as Keeley held it out to him. Chad took it and rested it on his knee.

“I’m going to ask you something now, Chad, and I need you to be honest with me.”

He nodded, tracking her as she stepped over Merc and sat back at her desk.

“Have you been having any suicidal thoughts?”

“No.”

“Chad.” Keeley’s voice was unyielding. “I need to know—”

“I swear I haven’t, and I’m not just saying that because you’ll report it back to my DI if I have. I’ve not been thinking about hurting myself. It’s just … a lot of people don’t survive their addictions, do they?”

Keeley sighed. “Not if they don’t have the right help, and the drive to change.”

He lowered his head, and concentrated on his coffee, ignoring Keeley’s concerned gaze. She studied him, picking up information about his current state, the tremors in his hands, and his bouncing knee. He failed at hiding them, but she didn’t comment and picked up her coffee mug with a sigh.

They drank listening to the rumbling of thunder, the soundtrack of a distant, yet unavoidable storm.

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A frown and a smile fought for dominance of Chad’s face. He stared down at Merc, wondering how the hell he’d eaten all of the rawhide bone. The treat had been huge, but Merc had demolished it in the blink of an eye.

“You better not get indigestion.”

Merc panted, drawn to any dog they passed as they searched for Josh in the park. Despite it being late afternoon, the sky was bright, bright enough Chad’s eyes stung as he crossed the football field. After unloading about his situation with Ally, he felt lighter, more content somehow.

When Chad spotted Josh, he laughed. He laughed loud enough that Merc stopped walking to look at him, puzzled.

“I see him.”

Merc stared up at him, oblivious. His clueless expression had Chad snorting.

Josh sat on a bench with a pizza box on his lap and a carrier bag rustling in the wind by his ankle. Tied to the top bench slats was a group of

black and grey helium balloons. The biggest, shiniest one, that dazzled Chad as he approached had the printed words, ‘It’s a boy’.

“Are you serious?” Chad asked, stopping in front of him.

“Well, he’s a boy, isn’t he?” Josh asked before sliding the pizza onto the bench and kneeling on the cold cement. Merc was all over Josh in a heartbeat, licking his face, and attempting to climb into his lap. Josh changed position from kneeling to sitting crossed legged so Merc could clamber onto him, kissing Josh’s chin.

Chad sat down on the bench. “I don’t even get that reaction.”

“That’s because you’re always so moody,” Josh said in a baby voice. “Moody, grumpy asshole Chad.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Hurts because it’s true.” Josh flashed him a smile. “I miss your face.”

“You haven’t seen it for five days at most—”

“Five days too long.”

“The feeling is … mutual.” Chad admitted.

Josh was all smiles, bright eyes, and ruffled blond hair. He emitted happy vibes, and Chad needed to soak them up.

“Do you hear that, Merc? Chad loves me. I bought pepperoni. It should still be warm, tuck in.”

“Thanks,” Chad flipped the lid and grabbed a slice. Merc jumped out of Josh’s lap and sat by Chad’s leg.

“Food wins every time.” Chad snorted.

Josh got back to his feet, dusting his knees. He dropped down beside Chad and took a slice. They ate in silence with their shoulders touching, until Chad’s thoughts chased away the good vibes.

“Anything exciting happen at the station?”

“Not really, a badly decayed body floated up from the riverbed, that’s what me and Faye are working on, trying to find out who he is.”

“And Ally?”

Josh winced. “Ally is on leave.”

Chad looked away. “For how long?”

“Indefinite leave, the DI said.”

“Oh.”

“How’s it going with Vincent?”

Chad sighed. “It’s not. We’ve had one…visit with him where all he did was describe Harriet as beautiful, and the rest of the week he’s been too sick to speak to us.”

“You’re being paid to sit at home and do nothing?”

“I’m not doing nothing.” He shuddered. “I’ve been reading through all the case files and reading transcribes of Vincent talking about how fun it is for him to cut up bodies.”

Josh eyed him. “No wonder you look like you haven’t slept for days.”

“Screw you.”

“Hurts because it’s true,” Josh repeated. He bit his lip. “They used some of the tapes in the documentary. I couldn’t sleep after I watched it, swear I could hear his voice.” He shuddered. “What about that James Poole? He looked on edge to say the least.”

Chad nodded. “He lacks patience, and there’s an angry side to him, that’s for sure. He called me yesterday, spitting and cursing down the phone at my lack of ideas, lack of possible locations. The landscape has changed, though, so most of the countryside has now been built on top of.”

“And how’s Lucy coping?” Josh asked. “She looked about ready to shatter when we saw her at the farm.”

“Hasn’t shattered yet, but it looks inevitable.”

“And the superintendent?”

“Hardly spoken to him. He wants me to report to James who will report to him.”

“Real friendly bunch, then?”

Chad sighed, picking up another slice of pizza. He checked no one was in earshot. “This is going to sound crazy, but … what if…”

“What if?”

“Vincent didn’t kill her.”

Josh dropped his pizza crust. Merc bumped into his knees to gobble it up.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” Josh asked, still gawping.

“Like I’m crazy.”

“Maybe don’t say crazy things. Vincent admitted it.”

“I know but … things don’t add up.”

“What things?” Josh asked, leaning closer.

Chad scanned the area around them again. “The lack of detail when he describes Harriet.”

Josh frowned.

“When he talks about the others, it’s like he’s reliving it. His recollection is almost palpable. He describes how their hair smells, and their skin felt, and the color of their eyes—like the exact color. You can more than picture it, he describes it so vividly it’s like you’re there, standing over him.”

Debbie Ark’s hair smelled of apples, freshly washed, Vincent had circled his finger around her damp pigtail.

Jessica Bamber had skin as soft as silk on her face, but her back was marred with acne scars that he dragged his nails over.

Kelly Price had glacial blue eyes set in a white porcelain face that he cut from their sockets to admire in his palm.

Chad’s stomach rolled. He dropped his pizza slice back in the box, and sucked a deep breath through his nose. Josh didn’t push him to continue, instead he eyed the slice Chad had abandoned.

“You eating that, or…”

Chad shook his head.

Josh grabbed the slice, and tore off a bite.

“It’s not just the lack of detail that made me suspicious. He says he killed her in his van, and there’s blood inside. There are photographs of it in back, the passenger seat, but there’s no proof any of it belonged to Harriet. DNA testing was not what it is now back then. Nothing physically places her in the van, just Vincent’s words.” Chad checked behind him. “And that’s not all. Part of Harriet’s file has been blacked out.”

“What? Why?”

“No idea.”

“But why would Vincent admit to a murder he didn’t do?” Josh asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe because he’s a psychopath.”

“You need a psychopath to understand a psychopath,” Josh muttered.

Chad frowned. “What?”

“Only another psychopath could understand why.” Josh’s jaw dropped with a gasp. “But wait, let’s say your crazy theory is right, then what *really* happened to her?”

“That’s what I want to find out.”

“Do James and Lucy know you don’t think it was Vincent?”

Chad shook his head. “No. There’s a strange energy between them, I can feel it. I doubt mentioning I have my doubts will be embraced by either of them. This needs to stay between us.”

Josh smiled. “You can count on me.” He finished his slice, then wiped his greasy hands down his jumper. “Now enough work talk, we’ve got a game to play.”

“A game?”

Josh nodded, reaching into the carrier bag beside the bench. He pulled out a football. “You, me, and Merc.”

Chapter Nine

Chad covered his nose as he stepped into the kitchen. The ripe smell of death still snuck through his fingers and invaded his nostrils. Romeo didn't seem to notice, pushing something around in the frying pan.

Merc bolted to his side, dripping drool.

"What the hell is that?" Chad asked, rushing over to open the window by the sink.

"Lambs liver."

"And why are you cooking that?"

"Lambs liver, dog's dinner," Romeo snorted. "Cockney rhyming slang."

He continued to push the liver around the pan.

It hissed in the oil.

Chad gagged as the smell intensified.

Vincent had spoken about the liver. He'd said it was his favorite organ to dissect, the strongest smelling and the smoothest in his hands.

Chad hovered his head by the window, counting to ten.

"I'm not eating that," he croaked.

"It's not for you. I'm making dog treats. There are lots of recipes online, but this had the best rating."

"I didn't know dogs could use computers."

Romeo waved the wooden spoon at him. "Is that you trying to be funny again? You'll have to try a lot harder than that to make me laugh."

Chad leaned away from the window and patted Merc on the head, but Merc was too distracted watching Romeo's every move. He licked his lips and pleaded his case with big watering eyes, but Romeo stayed unaffected by such tactics.

"Hello, Mercutio." Romeo said. "Good day?"

The only reply came in the form of a tusk of slobber hitting the tiled floor.

Romeo breathed in deep when Chad approached. "You smell of sweat and dirt," he looked Chad up and down, "Not to mention you're covered in it."

"Me and Josh had a kickabout in the park. Until Merc popped the ball."

Romeo smirked. “I’ll have to add a football to the list.” He switched the stove off and turned his attention to Merc. “It needs to cool, and then we can cut it up, and use it as treats.”

“Treats to do what?”

“To teach him not to chase our magpie friends.”

“Friends,” Chad snorted, shaking his head.

“And to give up precious tea-towels if he gets hold of them.”

“Still haven’t forgiven him?”

“I’ve not forgiven you.”

Chad laughed, only to regret it when the cooked liver infected the breath. His mind went straight back to Vincent’s files.

“It doesn’t smell that bad.”

“It does, but I’ve got a solution … coffee?” “Chad said, slipping past Romeo. “And we’re taking it in the other room.”

“Why?”

Chad twitched his nose as an answer.

“Fine,” Romeo said. “At least the dog doesn’t moan about my cooking, he whimpers for it.”

Chad prepared their coffees in the magpie mugs. Romeo hummed his approval and took hold of his. He rubbed his thumb against one. “Coffee tastes better in these mugs.”

“It tastes exactly the same.”

“Oh, I bought something else. It’s in the living room.”

Chad groaned. “Perhaps I’ll have my coffee outside then and not have to deal with it.”

“Come on,” Romeo said, steering him by the elbow. “I think you’ll like it.”

Chad dragged his feet as he followed, before hesitating in the living room doorway. A small package sat in the center of the coffee table. “It better not be magpie related.”

Romeo raised an eyebrow. “Open it.”

Chad trudged into the living room and set his mug down on the coffee table. “Am I going to hate it?”

“Have you ever hated anything I’ve bought?”

“Yes,” Chad pointed at one of the magpie cushions. “I hate that for starters.”

“Open it, Chad.”

He sighed and tore into the package. At first, he thought it was a leather belt, smooth on the inside and rougher on the out with thick stitching along the top and bottom, but it was small, and the brass buckle shone. Chad captured the silver heart swinging down.

Mercutio.

“You … you bought him a collar?”

“I know he’s got one, but this … this is a little more luxurious.”

Chad clutched the collar. A lump formed in his throat, and he tried to swallow it down to speak. “Let’s put it on him.”

Chad adjusted the buckle around Merc’s neck. The silver heart hung down. It rattled when Merc shook his head.

Chad couldn’t turn to Romeo, he couldn’t even pinpoint why he kept his back to him.

“Chad. Hey … it’s just a dog collar.”

“It isn’t any dog’s collar, it’s Merc’s.”

“Well, Mercutio’s. That’s what you called him…”

“I know, but I got home and you’re making him treats—I mean, you’re banned from cooking liver ever again, but still, knowing you’re doing that for him, and then I see the collar you bought him, and wow.” Chad’s eyes burned. He blinked back the fire, unsure where the wave of emotion was coming from. “Today has been … up and down.”

“Not to mention you’re running on about twenty minutes’ sleep.”

“You know about that?”

“Of course I know when you haven’t been sleeping. Is it Marc again?”

Chad bit the inside of his cheek. “It’s Tate.”

Romeo nodded.

“And it’s Vincent,” Chad shook his head. “Let’s say you’re right—”

“I’m always right.”

“Then who did kill her?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out and then we’re going flaunt it in his face before he dies. No one messes with my Juliet and gets away with it. He wants to ruin your name by giving you an unsolvable case, well, we’re going to damage his reputation by taking away one of his body count.”

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“Chad!”

His body jostled harshly, and he blinked a wide-eyed Romeo back into focus. He reached for Romeo, attempting a reassuring pat on his shoulder, but missed and hit Romeo in the throat. The bed bounced as Romeo held him upright.

“Sleep’n,” Chad slurred, “I was asleep.”

He blinked in quick succession, trying to work out where he was. The last thing he remembered, they’d been in the outhouse, and he’d been telling Romeo about James’s outbursts, Lucy’s fragile state, and the fact the two of them couldn’t stand each other.

“I’ve been trying to wake you,” Romeo growled.

Chad turned his head. He’d changed position, no longer propped up against Romeo’s chest, he lay in his arms, blinking blearily up at the ceiling. Romeo’s chest rose and fell harshly, and his pressing gaze stayed unblinking. His concern had returned, along with a slight flare of his nostrils, and hard-set eyes.

“Only a dream.” Chad held onto Romeo’s shoulder, but his squeeze did nothing to release the tension in Romeo’s muscles.

“Another bad one.” Romeo’s arms snaked around Chad, pulling him closer.

“Sorry.”

Chad took in the bedroom. He had a vague recollection of stumbling up there and brushing his teeth.

“Don’t apologize for something you can’t control. I hate that your mind is cruel when you’re trying to rest.” He tore his gaze from Chad. “I think I scared Mercutio shouting for you.”

Chad leaned up with Romeo’s arms still coiled around him and spied Merc in the doorway. He crept closer, only to scuttle back again.

“I’m okay.”

Merc stepped slowly across the room before vaulting on the bed. He accepted strokes from Chad, but sniffed Romeo’s hand, before licking his fingers.

Romeo sighed and patted Merc on the head. “Sorry, Mercutio.”

“That’s him saying he forgives you.”

“Have you told Keeley about the dreams?”

Chad swallowed. “No.”

“Chad…”

“I know, but they’re just dreams, it’s not like she can help.”

“The whole point of her is to help. I thought she was.”

“She is, but…” Chad groaned. “I doubt she can help with the dreams.”

Romeo’s nostrils flared. “She needs to know.”

“I’m not taking medication.”

“Maybe there’s something else. Please, Chad.”

“I’m handling it.”

“If you could see the expression on your face when you’re having one, you’d know it wasn’t merely a dream. Not to mention I have to shout the house down to wake you. Even I know that isn’t normal.”

Chad shrugged, nonchalant. “But I’m not normal, that’s why you love me.”

“Chad…”

“Okay, fine,” Chad said. “I will at my next session.”

“Good. Do you remember anything from this one?”

Chad touched his temple. He recalled a droning voice. It was still there, only too soft to decipher a single word, but it made him uncomfortable. It made his skin itch. He shook his head. “I think it’s…”

“Yes?” Romeo gave him an encouraging poke.

“Reading those transcribes.”

“What’s wrong with them?”

“I-I didn’t think he’d be able to recall his crimes in that much detail. I didn’t think he’d be so … graphic. It’s sick. He’s sick. I’ve interviewed a lot of killers over the years, but never has anyone recalled their crimes with that much … hunger.”

Romeo chuckled.

“It’s not funny, Romeo.”

“I know. The terror of it all is the high he’s chasing. His victim’s terror, those that discover them, the press, the public. It’s theatre, pantomime, it’s the same then as it is now, and those two detectives in the room, they’re part of it. He enjoys their unease, their disgust. He’s caught but he wants to drag those feelings out for as long as he can. It’s pathetic really.”

Chad's insides squirmed. "You said you remember the details of what you did."

Romeo looked away. He inflated with a deep breath. "Do you actually want me to answer that."

Chad nodded.

"Yes. I remember."

Words failed Chad. Romeo seemed to mistake the silence for the opportunity of proof.

"Number five…"

Fuck. Chad squeezed his eyes shut.

"He asked if I was hungry, I had toast from his kitchen, salty butter, seeded bread. I only ate half after a chia seed got stuck between my teeth."

Chad ran his tongue around his mouth as if he could feel it, too. The bite of buttery toast, and the irritating seed jamming between his teeth.

"Number four. I remember the wet, roughness of his dog's tongue against my hand as I went inside," he stroked his hand down Merc's back, "I wiped it on my pants."

Chad held his hand out to Merc, who licked his knuckles.

"Number three. Her cloggy perfume, at first it was faint, but when she came out of the bathroom, she'd resprayed herself and reapplied her nude lipstick. Number two. The picturesque cottage with dark beams, and a tiny door she warned me about so I didn't hit my head going inside. I still did, though." He touched the top of his head. "I can remember that throb."

Chad could see it behind his eyes—Romeo ducking to follow his victim into her home, and catching the top of his head. Was she concerned or did she laugh it off and tell him he should've listened?

"Four different light switches in four different homes, and the click they made when I turned them off."

"Stop," Chad whispered. "I can't … I can't listen to any more." He shifted away from Romeo an inch.

Romeo didn't try to pull him back. "Detail is vital to people with a dark infliction like me. If I couldn't recall what I've done, I wouldn't be able to control it as well as I can. We're monsters, but even monsters need control—they need rules, and boundaries."

"Do you think about them a lot? The four?"

"Less so now I have an outlet."

“And when you do, how does it make you feel?”

Romeo sighed. “I know you want me to say bad, or guilty, or remorseful, but the truth is I don’t. My brain isn’t wired for those emotions. When I look back, it’s like the build up to a *moment*.”

“The moment you kill them?”

“Yeah. Vincent values the spectacle, and the terror that comes from it over the act of ending a life. I’m the opposite. Ending a life is the thrill I seek. It’s what the monster inside me craves.”

Chad picked a thread coming from the duvet. He pulled it, until Romeo reached out and snapped it.

“I keep the details of other things, too. Nice things.”

“Like what?”

“Well,” Romeo leaned in to kiss Chad’s nose, “the taste of your kisses, of your skin, of your cum.”

“Romeo!”

Chad blushed and shoved him in the chest. Romeo smirked. “It’s true. The sound of your laugh, your outraged huffs, and that weird clicking sound you make when you’re asleep, which should be irritating, but it’s kind of adorable.”

“I do not make a clicking sound.”

“Your scent on my clothes. The smell of your hair gel when you put in far too much. Your sweat mixing with the smell of earth when we’ve been digging in the field. Your smile, your eyes, the shape of your lips when you tell me you love me.”

“Sometimes you can be a sappy bastard.”

Romeo chuckled. “Your hand in mine. Your lips on mine. My hands stroking over your skin, over the scars Marc left behind and the scarless patch in front of your heart.”

“They must bother you.”

“What?”

“The scars on my skin.”

Romeo’s eyebrow dipped over dark eyes. He brushed his hand over Chad’s cotton t-shirt. “The scars are a reminder of what I almost lost, and how close I was to losing it. They are part of you now, part of the man I love.” He stopped roaming his hand across Chad’s t-shirt and pressed his palm to Chad’s thumping heart. “Marc didn’t stop this. It still beats in your

chest, and I'll do everything in my power to make sure it stays that way. I won't let anyone stop it. It's mine."

"Yours to stop."

"No, mine to keep going."

You're gonna die at the hands of a serial killer.

Chad thought better than mentioning Ally's premonition and gave Romeo a weak smile.

"But my point is, I think about *you* far more than I think about murder. I remember details of you in more clarity than them. Vincent only has terror, that's all that made him feel in his life, but I have you, who has done the impossible and made me feel more than murder." Romeo gestured to the window. "And don't forget the others out there in our field, I think about them, too. The killers we killed *together* and the sex we had afterwards."

The blush in Chad's cheeks flared again.

"Don't you reminisce over past cases?" Romeo asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"They're not the kind of things you look back at with any fondness. People died, most of them violently, painfully, and their families have been ripped apart."

"Surely there's some pride? Some sense of satisfaction?" Romeo narrowed his eyes slightly.

"It's not enough. It's never enough."

"Enough of what? What's the end goal?"

"I have no idea." Chad shrugged. "Just to keep proving my worth."

"You don't need to prove a thing."

"I guess we'll agree to disagree."

"No. I'm right, and you're wrong. Now lay down and go back to sleep."

"Can Merc stay on the bed tonight?"

Romeo grunted. "This is the first, and last time…"

Chad pressed a quick kiss to Romeo's lips. "We'll see."

Chapter Ten

Chad spread his arms out for Lynn to pat him down. James paced in front of the door to Wiltknot, stopping every few seconds to glare at the red light. Dark circles hollowed his eyes. They seemed to grow deeper the more time passed. His tie twisted to one side, and half his shirt had slipped free from his belt.

Chad wetted his lips. "You know, you're not in this alone."

James stopped. "What?"

"All of us want to find her."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah—"

"Then why does it feel like you're treating this as a holiday?" James stabbed a finger out at him. "I haven't seen you at Alborough station once, and all this talk of conducting your own research at home … where is it, Chad?"

"I haven't found anything worth mention—"

"Harriet is relying on me." His nose pulled in a snarl, but his eyes watered. Chad saw the anguish and had to look away. "She's here. She's in this county and she has been the whole time. I have to be the one that finds her. If I had just kept her in the car."

"You …were cautioning her for possession."

James's brow furrowed. "What?"

"Sorry I'm late," Lucy said as she stepped inside reception. Her eyes were just as deep and dark as James's and the parting in her hair zig-zagged. She stroked her fingers through it, trying to sort it out, but gave up when she hit a knot.

"Oh, it's fine," James snapped. He heaved. "It's not like Vincent could die at any moment or anything…"

Lucy ignored him and spoke to Chad. "I was with my dad," her eyes flashed with venom when she looked over to James. "He thought it was for the best he didn't come here, considering…"

James tsked beneath his breath then resumed pacing in front of the door. Chad stepped back, allowing Lucy to go through the pat down from Lynn.

“Considering…” he repeated, waiting for one of them to bite, but they exchanged glares instead.

“He’s staying at a hotel close by,” Lucy mumbled, “waiting for news.”

James stopped. “Then let’s hurry this up and get in there so we can give him some.”

“What hotel?” Chad asked.

“The Swan and Oak.”

“You’re all set,” Lynn said before gesturing to the officer behind the desk. The light switched from red to green, and James raced down the corridor with Lynn demanding he slow down. Lucy went without tears, with her chin raised, and her lips firmly pressed together.

Lynn unlocked the door to the visiting room, huffing when James pushed ahead of Lucy and went inside. He reclaimed the furthest chair, Lucy took the one closest to the door, leaving Chad in the middle, boxed in on both sides and in the direct path of Vincent’s vacant glare.

Vincent looked greyer, and skinnier, and the wheeze and hiss of his oxygen tank tucked by his side droned on and on until it made Chad dizzy.

“We’re all here again, Vincent, just like you wanted,” James began. “We all want Harriet to be found.”

“Yes.” Vincent said into the corner with awe in his voice. He looked at James. “She needs to be found. The truth needs to be uncovered.”

Chad sat up straighter.

“She was a beautiful girl.” Vincent continued. “They all were.”

James nodded. “None of the others were as beautiful as Harriet.”

Chad frowned, side-eyeing James.

“Do you remember what she looked like?” James asked.

Vincent nodded, but his movements were jerky, and it looked like a struggle. “Long brown hair. Dark brown eyes.” His hand shook as he touched his throat. “Necklace. Red coat.”

James dragged his chair impossibly closer. “Yes, yes, Vincent, that’s Harriet.”

Chad looked away. All Vincent had done was recall the bullet points of Harriet’s missing person poster. When Chad glanced at Vincent again, his heart skipped over its next few beats. Vincent had that dark look in his eyes

again. The one for Chad. The one that told him this performance was all part of his punishment.

"That's her." James's breathing came fast. "Vincent, she went missing the 18th of April 1983—"

"Missing rib."

Chad blinked. Vincent continued to stare at him.

"Sorry, what did you say?" James asked, first glancing at Chad, then at Lucy.

"Missing rib." Vincent repeated, popping his lips with the B.

Lucy took a deep breath and let it out slowly against the glass. "Harriet had a rib removed when she was fourteen. She fell off her bike onto the curb, broke her ribs."

Shit.

Chad curled his toes in his shoes and kept up his poker face. Vincent slid his gaze skyward again. His brow contorted as if he was thinking, and they all waited on him.

"Dolphin tattoo."

Lucy gasped, covering her mouth.

James turned to her. "What is it?"

"She had a dolphin tattoo on her—"

"Don't say anything else," Chad interrupted. "Let *Vincent* tell us where it was."

"Left ankle. It was black and cheap."

Chad glanced at Lucy, who gave a singular nod.

Double shit.

Vincent's lips curled with the start of a smile. "I cut it off first. Then she was beautiful again."

"I didn't know she had a tattoo." James mumbled. "She never told me."

"Hardly anyone knew," Lucy replied. "If our dad had found out, he would've gone crazy."

James stiffened. His spine pulled taut. "You knew about it?"

"Yes—"

"You hated Harriet, would do anything to get her in trouble, and you didn't tell your dad?" James snorted, shaking his head.

“I was looking out for her—”

“She must’ve had something on you to stop you from telling your dad. What’s worse than getting a tattoo at seventeen? What did she know that kept your silence?”

“You don’t know me. You don’t know mine and Harriet’s relationship.”

“She told me enough.”

“Was that before or after you forced your hands down her knickers in your police car?”

James shot to his feet. His chair clattered to the floor behind him. “It’s you that knows nothing!”

“I know you were being inappropriate with my sister,” Lucy snapped back.

“And I know you were a bully to her.”

“Harriet gave out as good as she got. We were sisters. Sister’s fight sometimes.”

Chad frowned at the back and forth between James and Lucy.

Vincent exhaled long and slow, then fumbled beneath his blanket. The door as his back swung open, and the nurse rushed to get him.

“Sorry, but the shouting,” Vincent touched his ear. “Gives me such a headache.”

“No,” James slapped his hands together to beg, “Come on, Vincent, please. Just tell us where she is.”

As soon as the door closed, James towered over Lucy still on her chair.

“You clueless bitch.”

“James,” Chad snapped, getting to his feet.

He trudged away, leaving Chad and Lucy alone in the room.

“I’m sorry he—”

“Don’t apologize for his behavior, Chad. Everyone knows he’s got a temper.”

“What he said … about you bullying Harriet?”

Lucy’s head whipped to him. “Don’t be ridiculous. We were sisters. We had petty arguments, nothing big.”

“James said Harriet told him—”

“James is delusional over Harriet. What he says happened, and what *actually* happened are two wildly different things. He’s a fantasist, and he projected this … love story onto my sister. Harriet went with my dad to the police station and reported him. They were trying to file an injunction to keep him away, and when my sister was first reported missing, James was the top suspect. They even arrested him, but he was released a day later.”

“You’re not suggesting…”

“James killed my sister. Trust me, up until Vincent admitted to killing her, I thought it was James. I thought the police had covered it up from some fucked-up loyalty. They’d protected him, even knowing he was a sexual predator, they protected him. Was it such a giant leap to believe they’d also protect him after he’d lost all control and murdered my sister?”

“The tattoo. A dolphin?”

Lucy nodded. “She showed it to me. It was an inch big, the black outline of a dolphin.”

“How long had she had it before she went missing?”

“At least four months.”

“Did anyone else see it?”

“I don’t know.” She bit her lip. “Why are you asking about the tattoo? It isn’t relevant, just some silly thing she got done.”

Chad shrugged. “I was curious, that’s all.”

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“That’s one hell of a frown.” Romeo remarked, lifting his eyebrow.

Chad shot him a look, then continued to flip through a folder from Harriet’s file. “We’ve got a problem with your theory.”

“Which explains why you went straight to the outhouse without saying hello to me or Mercutio.”

Chad paused. He hugged the folder to his chest and crossed the room in three quick strides to press a kiss to Romeo’s mouth. “Sorry.”

“You’re forgiven,” Romeo said while Chad reached down to pat Merc’s head. “What’s the problem?”

“Well,” Chad continued to flip through pages as he spoke, “out of nowhere Vincent has produced some details.”

“That are public?”

“No.”

Chad stopped on the page he'd been searching for, whipping his gaze back and forth before eyeing the naked pencil drawing of a woman and the labels that pointed at her abdomen. "Damn it."

"Chad, what details?"

"Harriet fell off her bike and landed on a curb when she was fourteen. She broke five ribs on her left side, and one had to be removed. She had a scar," Chad pointed Romeo towards the drawing and the referenced area. "This isn't common knowledge and Vincent *knew*."

"Missing rib…"

"That's not all. Vincent told us Harriet had a tattoo of a dolphin on her left ankle. He said it looked cheap." Chad flicked the page. "These were made for each of the missing girls to help identify whatever body parts that were found. A tattoo would be documented, but it's not here, it's not here because very few people knew about it."

"Then how do you know Vincent wasn't lying?"

"Lucy confirmed Harriet had a tattoo of a black dolphin on her ankle. How the hell does Vincent know about that when not even Harriet's parents knew?"

Romeo wandered away rubbing his chin.

"Maybe … it was him, Romeo. Maybe all this time he's been holding onto the details for this moment."

"No." Romeo said firmly.

"There was blood in Vincent's car. We don't know any of it belonged to Harriet, but equally, we don't know it *didn't* belong to her either. She fits the profile. She's in the right location, and Vincent's crimes were sporadic, there's no time pattern between one murder and the next." Chad strolled over to the whiteboard. Romeo had gleefully ripped Vincent's face from the suspects board two nights before, but Chad picked up the blue tac to reapply it.

"No," Romeo said, marching over and taking Vincent's mugshot. He folded it then shoved it in his back pocket. "I still don't think it was him."

"I'm not saying it was, but he's a suspect, Romeo. He needs to be up here."

Chad waved a hand at the board. James and Lucy were on the board, along with Gavin Hargreaves, Harriet's ex-boyfriend, and Leslie Grant, James's wife at the time. Chad had drawn a red line through to indicate they

were deceased. Gavin from an overdose twenty years ago, and Leslie from cancer, seven years ago.

They were still suspects, still had the motive. Gavin had been dumped. James's infatuation with Harriet must have angered his wife. The only other person on the board was the mystery person, a blue outline of a man with a question mark in their head, their identity, yet to be discovered. If they existed at all.

"There's a key bit of evidence missing," Romeo said. "It could support my theory."

"What is it?"

"The missing file."

Chad blinked. "What missing file?"

"The girl that got away. The one who escaped. Her evidence could be vital. Vincent says he murdered Harriet in the van, like he did to all of them, but he didn't with her. She escaped his *house*."

"The DI told me this is all he could give me. It's not uncommon for surviving victims' testimony to be protected—sealed for however many years."

"Maybe you could *unseal* it…"

"I can't. I don't have power to do that, not even the police have that. Decisions like that are for the courts to decide and they're only unsealed under specific circumstances."

Romeo turned away. "Did you find anything else out about James?"

Chad tilted his head, watching Romeo. "As it happens…" He sighed. "Lucy told me he is a fantasist and projected this love story onto Harriet. In reality, Harriet was afraid of him." He walked over to the open file on the desk and tapped his fingers on the open page. Romeo joined him and scanned through the text.

"Harriet reported him." Romeo mumbled.

"As did her dad. He wanted an injunction taken out against James to stop him from coming within two miles of Harriet."

Romeo ran his fingers against the text. "The officers said Harriet appeared frightened and cried throughout the meeting."

Chad nodded. "When Harriet was first reported missing, the police didn't assume *the killer* had struck again, they thought James was responsible and arrested him on the same day."

“It’s him then.” Romeo pointed his finger at James. “Now all you need to do is lure him here, we force a confession, get him to tell us what he did with her, then I get to kill him. Case closed.”

Chad scrunched up his face. “They released James. They didn’t even hold him for the full forty-eight hours, and why, if it was him and he’d gotten away with it for all these years, would he agree to these sessions with Vincent to find her?”

“So you’ve ruled him out?”

“No, but there is real torment in his eyes. He might well be a fantasist, but his feelings for Harriet are real.”

“He wouldn’t be the first killer to destroy the subject of their infatuation.”

“I need to find out what happened that night in the car, but every time I bring up him *with* Harriet, he shuts me out. I need to get him to open up to me, but I don’t know how.”

“From James’s point of view, him and Harriet were this inappropriate love story with everyone against them.”

“Something like that.”

“Like Romeo and Juliet.” Romeo smiled. “If anyone knows inappropriate love, it’s you.”

Chad narrowed his eyes.

“Lucy,” Romeo said with a chuckle. “Tell me about Lucy.”

“She was … strong today. It was James that broke. He accused her of bullying Harriet, but she argued they were sisters, and sisters have petty arguments and squabbles. She hadn’t told their parents about Harriet’s tattoo, not wanting to get her into trouble. James seems to think that means Harriet must’ve had some dirt on Lucy to keep her mouth shut, but Lucy said she was looking out for her sister.”

“The perfect little sister … can’t possibly be her, right?”

Chad ran a hand through his hair. “She’s the only one that confirmed the tattoo. She was reluctant from the start to meet with Vincent. What if … she told Vincent about the tattoo?”

“How?”

“I don’t know. I’ve asked for all Vincent’s visiting logs, his verified numbers and addresses, too. But so far, I’ve heard nothing from Lynn.”

“The sister,” Romeo nodded. “All you’ve got to do is lure her—”

“Romeo,” Chad raised his eyebrows. “I don’t know if it was Lucy. It could’ve been our mystery culprit, or it could’ve been Harriet herself, leaving the area. Missing people aren’t always murdered people.”

“Then we find Harriet, you lure her here—”

“Stop,” Chad chuckled, pressing his palms to Romeo’s chest. “Slow down. I want to get this right … I *have* to get it right. We need to outsmart him. We need to win.”

Romeo wrapped his arms around Chad’s back. He frowned, studying Chad and wound his arms even tighter around him, not breaking their gazes.

“Lucy’s father has flown in from Italy. I need to speak to him. And I need to find someone else that can verify the dolphin tattoo.” Chad glanced at the board. “My first thought was to contact Gavin—”

“As he’s dead, I’m guessing we need to find a medium then.”

Chad kissed Romeo on the nose.

“And what do you need from me?” Romeo asked.

“Vincent’s motivation for this, and something more than the lack of detail to completely rule Vincent out. Until then,” Chad slipped his hand into Romeo’s back pocket, and pulled out the folded mugshot, “he goes on the board.”

Chapter Eleven

"Five police escorts," James said, pointing to each of the vehicles. Three cars, and two motorcycles. "It's not exactly subtle. Maybe I should have a word with Pete."

Pete.

"I'd rather 'not subtle' than Vincent escapes," Chad muttered.

"I don't think there's much chance of that."

"You're … close to the superintendent?"

"We meet up now and then."

"Meet up?"

"Clay pigeon shooting, or at least we used to, but I'm getting on now, my eyesight isn't what it used to be."

Vincent was helped across the parking lot by Lynn and the nurse, each of them supporting one of his arms. Every breath he took wheezed and crackled with the threat of a coughing episode. Vincent's eyes shuttered closed as he paused to recover his breath. He took in small gasps of air before resuming inching closer.

Chad glanced over to the perimeter fence. The press were there, like they had been all week, but with Vincent in shot they exploded with energy.

James unhooked a pair of handcuffs from his belt. The metallic clicking alerted the nurse who glowered.

"Are handcuffs necessary?"

The wrinkled skin on the back of Vincent's hand reminded Chad of wet tissue paper, and bulging dark veins wrapped up his arms to his thin t-shirt. Handcuffs, no matter how loose, looked as if they'd break his frail bones.

James reattached the handcuffs to his belt and averted his gaze.

Lynn and the nurse helped Vincent into the car before securing his lap belt. Lynn shot Chad a small smile before backing away, but the nurse rushed around the car and pulled on the passenger handle.

"What are you doing?" James asked.

Her eyes narrowed on him. "I'm coming with you."

She got inside the car still glowering. Chad shared a look with James, but neither of them commented on their added passenger.

"Ready?" James asked, clutching the keys.

Chad looked over to one of the escort cars. Lucy was already sitting inside one, but she didn't look up at him. She stared down into the footwell.

"As I'll ever be."

James nodded, climbing inside, and Chad joined him. He unhooked the GPS and tapped in Little Wren, Lucy and Harriet's village in the county of Bardhum. Their farm was on the outskirts, but they had to start somewhere, and James hoped driving past the landmarks that still remained, like the church, would help jog Vincent's memory.

"What do we call you?" James asked.

The nurse peeked her head from around Chad's chair, nostrils flaring. "Pauline."

Chad had only caught fleeting glances of Pauline when she whisked Vincent away. She'd scraped her black hair back into a tall ponytail that swished as she shook her head. From the angry creases and barely blinking stares, Chad got the impression she wasn't supportive of the situation.

"What's in the bag?" James asked, craning his neck back to look by her feet.

"Medical supplies."

"Like?"

"Morphine. Cannulas. Tape. Cotton wool. Water. Sponges. A blood pressure monitor."

James nodded. "We need you to keep him alive for as long as possible."

"I have been keeping him alive," she snapped.

"We're all set," Chad said, pressing start on the GPS.

James had insisted he knew the way, and the roads in Little Wren, but Chad argued the voice from the GPS speaking the road names might trigger a memory from Vincent.

In reality, Chad just wanted free of the pressing silence that came with Vincent.

As soon as they left Wiltknot, they were surrounded, not just by the escort, but the press, too. Their cars and vans followed them, weaving between the flashing blue police cars around James's black sedan.

"Christ!" James yelled, slamming his foot on the brake. Chad winced as he was thrown forward into his seatbelt. "Do they have a death wish?"

Chad rubbed his chest and turned to the back seat to find Pauline bracing her arm against Vincent's chest. "This is madness." She shook her head. "We should turn back."

"We're barely three hundred meters from Wiltknot," James replied. "I'm not turning back."

James's way of dealing with a dangerous vehicle situation was to put his foot down and risk killing them all.

Chad clutched the seat to cling on and gritted his teeth as they took a sharp corner. He wasn't the only one hanging on for life. Pauline covered Vincent with her body, clinging to the headrest of his seat.

"James, slow down," Chad hissed.

"It's DI Poole to you." The car lurched, increasing speed. "And don't tell me how to drive. I was driving before you were born."

"That doesn't mean you're a better driver."

Chad saw his phone light up through the fabric of his pants. He released one hand from the seat to tug it from his pocket.

If he crashes, I'll kill his whole family.

Chad blinked. "They're filming us. They're filming us right now."

"So?"

"Everyone can see you driving like a complete idiot."

James slowed down, allowing Lucy's escort car to catch up. A helicopter whirled above them.

Chad exhaled, slumping into his seat. He reached down for the file on the floor and opened it up on the arial footage of Little Wren. Many of the fields and woodlands had been sold to housing developments, and Harriet and Lucy's school had been knocked down and rebuilt from scratch at a different location.

Chad turned the page and found the church, one of the only identifiable features between Little Wren of the past and Little Wren of the present. It was a traditional church positioned north of the village at the top of a slope. Chad spotted the west tower topped with a spire that housed the bells. Yew trees surrounded the church, evergreen all year round, and old, chipped and cracked gravestones were on the east side of the church in front of the porch.

Vincent said something indecipherable from the backseat, but Pauline seemed to have heard him and craned her neck between the seats.

“He wants you to stop in front of the church.”

James straightened in his seat, nodding eagerly. He slowed the car to a stop beside the surrounding wall. Chad could see the patches where it had been restored over the years.

“Such a quaint little thing,” Vincent remarked from the back.

“Did you go to church?” James asked.

Vincent’s laugh was dry and painful. “No.”

The escort surrounded them, flashing blue light, and in turn, the press vans and cars boxed them in, trapping their car against the church. Doors opened, people shot out, and their shouted questions murmured outside of the car.

“This was Harriet’s church,” James whispered. “She used to sing in the choir. Her voice was beautiful, haunting but beautiful.”

Chad bit his lip. “Is that where you first met her?”

James flashed Chad a look of scorn, then he twisted to face Vincent on the backseat.

“This place is important to you.” Vincent said to James.

“Yeah—”

“Because your daughter is buried here.”

Chad opened then closed his mouth. He hadn’t been aware James had a daughter. He frowned. He didn’t know much about him at all, other than he had a wife at the time of the murders and was somehow involved with Harriet.

James paled. “How did you—”

“I am sorry. It’s so tragic to lose a child so early into her life.”

“Yes,” James swallowed. “She’s buried here,” he twisted to look out his window. “She’s on the other side.”

“Father Daniels told me…” Vincent began.

Chad stiffened, peeking a look back at Vincent looking out the window.

James’s teeth snapped together in his haste to keep quiet.

Vincent wet his lips before continuing. “He told me traditionally people were buried on the on east side so they could be facing the lord when he arrives on judgment day.”

“I didn’t know that,” James whispered.

“Where’s your daughter?”

“On the north.”

Vincent hummed. “Do you know who they buried there?”

James shook his head. Chad’s insides filled with dread. The edges of Vincent’s mouth lifted into a smile as he bore a hole in the back of James’s seat.

“Criminals, suicides, and unbaptized infants.”

Chad darted a look at James. The remaining color leeched from his face.

“So if I can’t remember where Harriet is, if I can’t admit my sins, I’ll end up in the same place as her. Isn’t that a nice thought?”

James restarted the engine, and put the car in gear. No one moved for them, so he blasted the horn and revved the engine.

“I can give her a hug from you if you’d like…”

“You’re an animal.” James growled. He reversed, colliding with the police car behind them. The journalists who hastily set up cameras got the message and began to pack their equipment away for the next location.

“I’m tired. I’d like to go back to Wiltknot.”

“Like hell,” James snapped. “I’m going to drive you around, and you’re going to remember taking Harriet, and you’re going to tell us what you did to her and where the hell we can find her.”

James pulled out, scratching the side of his car against another in his haste to get away. He put his foot down, speeding away from the church. He flicked the lights for his unmarked car, and their droning siren filled the air. It parted the cars in front of them, but when they drove up to an ambulance doing the same, James cursed and punched the steering wheel.

“Calm down,” Chad told him. “We’re not going to find Harriet if we spin off the road.”

“We need to go back to Wiltknot.” Pauline said firmly. “Vincent has asked—”

“He’s a criminal.” James snarled. “He doesn’t have human rights. He doesn’t get a choice. He should be *made* to tell us.”

“DI Poole.” Pauline hissed. “Take us back to Wiltknot.”

“I’m no longer willing to help your efforts today, not after that.” Vincent added. “Not unless you say sorry for your rudeness.”

“Go to hell.”

James’s fists tightened on the wheel.

Chad bit his lip. “James—”

“Don’t fucking *James* me, Chad.”

Chad glowered. “Take us back to the prison.”

“Fine.” He yanked the steering wheel, pulling them into a sharp U-turn. Chad winced as the force pushed his head back into the seat.

James dropped his speed, and Chad relaxed a fraction, uncurling his aching fingers from the bottom of his seat. Pauline stopped pinning Vincent in place, and Vincent stared out the window with another blank expression on his face.

Lynn stood waiting for them when they arrived back at Wiltknot. She helped Pauline get Vincent into a wheelchair before pushing him into reception. Chad didn’t move from the car. He pulled obsessively at the knee of his pants, thinking of something to say to James.

“I’m sorry about what Vincent—”

“Don’t,” James snarled. He curled one of his hands into a fist before releasing it. “Don’t even … just get out of my car.”

Chad unclipped his belt, grabbed his file and left James alone. Lucy jogged over to him. Breathless, she asked, “Did Vincent say anything?”

“No.”

Lucy gestured to James. “What’s up with him?”

Chad led her away from the vehicle. “Vincent poured salt in a wound.”

“Ashley?”

“What?”

Lucy shot a look over her shoulder. “That was James’s daughter. She’s buried at the church in Little Wren. There were complications… She only lived a day.”

“I had no idea.”

“He … He met Harriet at the church. She used to sing in the choir.”

James started the engine and took off from the car park.

“What do we do now?” Lucy asked.

Chad glanced at the prison, then away again. “Actually, I was wondering if I could meet your dad…”

****

Chad met Lucy and Harriet’s father, Michael in The Swan and Oak’s restaurant. He was already seated at a table, but climbed to his feet to kiss

Lucy on the cheek, and shake Chad's hand. His fingers were spindly, and his grip weak, and as soon as Chad let go he eased himself back onto his seat with a creak in his spine.

His skin was tanned, and sunspots covered his cheeks and the backs of his hands. He had the same deep brown eyes as both Lucy and Harriet.

"It's nice to meet you, Chad." Michael said, gesturing for him to take the seat opposite. "I'm sorry Vincent has dragged you into this. It's probably all the press you receive."

Lucy shrugged off her coat. "What do you mean?"

"Chad is always in the newspapers, even abroad. Why else would Vincent choose him to be involved if it's not for publicity?"

Chad decided not to mention he and Vincent had history.

"Tell me honestly, Chad, do you think Vincent is going to tell you where my daughter is?"

"No. I don't think he is."

"This is all a farce then, an added insult to my family before he dies, and he's dragged my other daughter into it, too."

"I'm doing it for mom," Lucy whispered. "Even if there's a microscopic chance of finding Harriet, I've got to take it, right?"

Michael shook his head. "I saw how the need to find Harriet consumed your mother. She couldn't move on. Vincent gets some kind of kick out of that, knowing the pain and terror he caused lingers. I don't want you to be consumed with it when you don't find her. I don't want you to waste away to a shell of yourself like your mother did."

"That won't happen. But I need to try for her." Lucy said.

Michael turned his attention to Chad. "You were at Wiltknot this morning?"

"Yes—"

"James drove Vincent to Little Wren church." Lucy interrupted. "He mentioned Ashley."

Michael exhaled hard from his nose. "I felt sorry for him when she passed away. Losing a daughter," he shook his head. "It's a pain I understand more now than I did then, but it doesn't excuse his behavior. He met Harriet at the service for Ashley, she sang in the choir. He continued to go to church, at first with his wife, but then on his own. He'd stay long after Sunday service and that's how this all started."

“What started?”

“His obsession with my daughter. The letters. The gifts. The walks around the graveyard and the drives home. She told me they were friends, but I could see what he was doing. I saw the way he looked at her.” Michael’s top lip curled. “He tried to kiss her, tried to force himself on her, and she told me. I went down to the police station to report him, and guess what they said…”

“What?” Chad asked.

“They said that James was under a lot of stress,” he snorted. “That’s all they said, like his behavior was excusable, and I should let it continue. Two months later, I went back to the station with Harriet. She was distraught, and they filed away my complaint and request for an injunction. I heard nothing back from them. It was swept away.”

Chad swallowed. He’d seen the complaint made by Michael and Harriet, but nothing else. No reprimand for James, or beginning of the injunction process, the complaint had been filed away with no plan by staff to investigate it any further.

“I took matters into my own hands, warned off James and told the local schools about him. I made flyers, handed them out, and guess what, I was arrested. I was threatened with defamation. On the night she went missing, two weeks after I was arrested for protesting his behavior, she was seen in a car with him.”

“He picked her up from the school gate,” Lucy closed her eyes. “I didn’t tell my dad at the time. I lied, said Harriet was going over to her friend Becca’s house.”

“Why did you lie?” Chad asked.

“I didn’t want dad to worry, I didn’t want him to be mad. He was trying so hard to keep James away, but he lingered.”

Michael pressed his lips in a grim line.

“He was the last person to see her alive. The man I was trying to protect her from picked her up from school, and we all know the police protect their own, and no one came to speak to us about James’s behavior. Even after he was arrested, no one was interested in his stalking of my daughter.”

Lucy reached across the table and took her dad’s hand in hers. “I told Chad, we thought it was him.”

Michael nodded. “Up until Vincent confessed, I thought James had killed her. I thought they’d protected him and helped cover up whatever he did to her that night, but it wasn’t him. Harriet had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time that night.” His nostrils flared. “But it was James that put her in that place. If it wasn’t for him, she would’ve been on the bus, she wouldn’t have been walking down the side of the road. If it wasn’t for James, she would still be alive.”

“Harriet had … a tattoo.”

“No,” Michael snorted. “Harriet didn’t have any tattoos. She was seventeen.”

Lucy cringed. “She had a small one.”

“What?” Michael shook his head.

Lucy indicated the size of it with her thumb and index fingers. “About this big, on her ankle. It was the outline of a dolphin.”

“A dolphin,” Michael’s brow folded with a frown. “Why would she get a dolphin?”

Lucy shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“She didn’t even like dolphins. Are you sure?”

“I saw it.” Lucy said.

“You saw it and didn’t tell me?” His eyes widened. “Did your mother know?”

“I don’t think so.”

“But you knew, and didn’t tell us?”

“You’d have been angry.”

“Yeah,” he chuckled with no humor. “A tattoo on her ankle…” Michael sat up straighter with a gasp. He clutched the tablecloth. “Why is that significant? There’s no way you’ve found her—” he looked at Lucy. “I would know.”

“No,” Chad cursed himself. “We’ve not found her.”

“Then why?” Michael looked between him and Lucy. “What’s this talk of a tattoo about?”

“Vincent remembers … the tattoo.”

“What?” Michael breathed. “How could he—”

“He remembers *seeing* Harriet’s tattoo.”

Michael’s frown morphed into horror, then he looked away.

Lucy swallowed. “And he knew … knew Harriet was missing a rib.”

“How could he know…” Michael slapped a hand to his mouth. “He … couldn’t have.”

Lucy lowered her gaze. “He must’ve … found out for himself when he…”

Michael pushed off from the table and got to his feet. He swayed, and Chad shot up to support him only to be swept aside by Michael’s hand.

“I’m okay,” Michael murmured. “I just need to lie down.”

“I’ll help you back to your room.” Lucy said, rushing to take him by the elbow.

Chad dropped back into his chair and watched them go.

****

There was something about being slobbered on by an ecstatic Merc that cleansed Chad’s soul. He crouched in the hallway, stroking and rubbing him, until his shirt collar was grabbed by Romeo’s fist, and he got hauled to his feet.

“Whoa—”

Chad flung his arms around Romeo for balance.

“I meant it when I said I would’ve killed James’s whole family if he had crashed.”

“I know.” Chad kissed Romeo’s mouth.

“He was driving like a maniac.”

“This … situation is getting to him.”

Romeo hummed, and rested his chin at Chad’s temple. “Worked out what happened to Harriet that night yet?”

“Nope. Worked out Vincent’s motivation?”

“Partly.”

Chad leaned back in his arms. “What?”

“You. You’re the reason he’s doing this. Revenge for not visiting him, but I’m missing something, I can feel it.” Romeo’s gaze crawled up to the ceiling as he thought.

“I meant, why did he confess to a murder he didn’t do?”

“That’s easy.” Romeo looked at him again. “To protect the killer. Us with our evil inflictions against everybody else. Serial killer solidarity.”

“You kill killers.” Chad reminded him.

“Only because those are the people you’ve allowed me to kill. It’s our compromise, remember? You have a chain around the monster.” Romeo

shrugged. “And for now, he’s quite happy to wear it.”

Chapter Twelve

Candice Holmes.

Friend of Harriet and Lucy Hastings. Chad flexed his fingers before reaching for the doorknocker. He knocked three times, then took a step back to wait. The curtains twitched. Chad heard a chain, then a bolt, before the door opened a crack.

"I'm Detective Chad—"

"I know who you are." Candice opened the door wider. Grey strands ran through her long ginger hair, and she lowered her blue eyes to the ground before looking up at him again.

"I need to ask you a few questions. Can I come in?"

Candice nodded and retreated. She hugged her cardigan around herself as she led Chad through her house and into the kitchen. Chad waited until she gestured to the table, then took a seat.

The kitchen walls were painted a bright, canary yellow, and light streamed through the window at Candice's back. Her eyes tracked the floor again before trailing up to find Chad. His small smile got flatly rebuffed when she turned her back to him.

"Do you want anything to drink?" she asked.

"Water would be great."

She nodded, retrieving a glass from the cupboard. "Must've been quite the drive to get here."

"Just over six hours."

He'd tried other names on the list before Candice, but they'd relocated too far for him to travel, died, or had been lost from the system. He struck gold with Candice, friends with both Hastings sisters from an early age.

Candice handed him the glass of water before pouring orange juice into a glass for herself.

"What is it you want to know?"

"You were friends with Lucy and Harriet."

Candice frowned. "I was in the same year at school as Lucy. We were best friends a long time ago."

"Not anymore?"

She laughed softly. “I moved away from Little Wren and out of Bardhum. Sometimes friendships don’t last the test of time and sometimes they don’t last distance either. We don’t speak, but there’s no bad blood between us. I want closure for her, and closure for her family, but above all, I want Harriet to be found.”

“Did Lucy and Harriet get on?”

“There was a time they did, but hormones kicked in,” she laughed, then sipped her orange.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Teenagers with teenage hormones. Boys.”

“Boys?”

Candice sighed. “They fell out over a boy. Over Gavin Hargreaves. He used to be the bad boy back then. Shaggy haired, with bright green nail varnish, smoked like a chimney—yeah—both of them had the hots for him.”

“Lucy … liked Harriet’s boyfriend?”

“See,” Candice pointed a finger at him. “Lucy became friends with him first, hoped they’d become a thing, but Gavin only saw Harriet like that. I think he was friends with Lucy just to be around Harriet, but Lucy got upset when I mentioned it.” She shrugged. “Silly schoolgirl crushes.”

“But they broke up? Gavin and Harriet broke up?”

“Yeah, after he found out about the letters and gifts from that creepy police officer, James, he dumped her.”

Chad pressed down on his thigh to stop his leg jumping. “Did you know how Harriet felt about James?”

“I was closer to Lucy than Harriet. She didn’t talk about him with me,” Candice screwed up her face. “But him lingering around the school, whisking her away to *Melbourn Spring* … it wasn’t right.”

“Why is Melbourn Spring significant?”

“There is a parking lot there now, but back then, there was a rest area. You could squeeze two cars in, three at most, but the spring was popular for making out, drinking, and skinny dipping. It was inappropriate for a police officer to be driving a seventeen-year-old there, but the police didn’t want to know.”

“Was Gavin angry about the break up?”

Candice laughed lightly. “He wasn’t angry about anything, ever. Lucy hoped Gavin would stick around, but he left to live with his father. I heard he died of an overdose years ago. I was shocked, but not surprised. He loved to smoke, but Harriet hated the stuff. The smell was enough to turn her stomach.”

Chad bit his lip. “Do you know if Harriet had a tattoo?”

“Oh, yeah.” Candice snorted. “It was a dolphin on her ankle. She showed us once when we were doing hockey—rolled down her sock and there it was. I remember thinking it was amazing at the time, and I ended up getting one, too, with a razor blade and black ink, that’s all it was. I got it covered decades ago, but you can still feel it,” she stretched her arm across the table.

Chad studied the huge black and white rose tattoo, then Candice tutted. “*Feel* it.”

He hesitated before brushing his fingers over her skin. He stopped at the indents, outlining the star with his fingertip. It reminded him of his own scars, cut into his skin. Forever a reminder no matter what he did.

“My parents were livid,” Candice smirked. “Harriet’s parents would’ve been, too, but she was clever enough to get it out of sight, me being a rebellious idiot decided on the middle of my forearm. They grounded me for months, and demanded to know who did it.”

“Who did?”

“Gavin. My parents would’ve strung him up if they had found out.”

“Lucy knew it was Gavin that did Harriet’s tattoo?”

Candice nodded. “That’s the only reason I think she didn’t tell on Harriet. She knew their dad would track Gavin down and knock him out. She was smitten, even when he was dating her sister, but that’s young love for you, isn’t it? It makes you crazy.”

“What was Harriet and Lucy’s relationship like before she disappeared?”

“Before Vincent Whitehall murdered her you mean? It was strained. Lucy blamed Harriet for Gavin leaving,” Candice rubbed her brow. “Forgive me, but what does any of this have to do with what’s happening now?”

Chad swallowed the lump in his throat. “I’m just trying to establish the events that led to Harriet’s disappearance.”

“Events?”

“Yes, Harriet’s mental wellbeing at the time.”

“Why does it matter? Vincent abducted and murdered her. The last person to see her alive was James Poole. Whatever … rivalry or rows Harriet and Lucy had were trivial. They loved each other. Lucy loved Harriet, and the lunchtime when she was announced missing, we got in the truck and drove around looking for her.”

“Wait … you were with Lucy that morning? At the farm?”

Candice nodded. “No. We were at my house. She stayed at mine that night.”

Chad’s temples throbbed. “That’s not what the official reports say.”

“What?”

“They say Lucy was at home that night with her dad.”

Candice looked away. She tapped her nails against the table. “Perhaps I’m mistaken. Maybe she was at mine the night before. Yeah, it was—”

“Don’t take me for an idiot. Lucy was at yours the night Harriet went missing, wasn’t she?”

Candice blew out a harsh breath. “She stole her parent’s truck to come over. Not for the first time.”

“There’s no mention of that in the reports. Her own father said she was at home.”

“She was driving without a license. Her dad didn’t want the police to get involved. It was his business, and he didn’t trust them.” Candice clutched her hair. “I’ll ask again, what does any of this have to do with what’s happening now?”

“I’m establishing what happened that night—

“You’re tearing open old wounds. Vincent Whitehall kidnapped and killed Harriet, so why are you picking apart their relationship? They were teenage girls. I’ve had teenage girls, and they argue, and fight, but they’re there for each other when they’re needed. Harriet and Lucy were the same. Lucy was upset over Gavin, but she knew James was a creep, she knew he was dangerous and tried to get Harriet to get on the bus with us that afternoon, but Harriet went with him.”

Chad pushed his glass forward an inch more before getting to his feet. “Thank you for your time.”

****

“The tattoo checks out?” Romeo mumbled, rubbing his chin. He studied Chad’s whiteboard intently and read through all Chad’s scribbled notes he’d plucked from Harriet’s file and Candice’s memory.

“Uh huh, dolphin tattoo checks out.”

“Why a dolphin?” Romeo asked.

Chad snorted. “It’s funny. Michael asked the same. I don’t know, they’re … cute I guess.”

“No, they’re not. If I was to get a tattoo, it would have to mean something.”

“I’d already know what you’d get.”

Romeo glanced over his shoulder. “What?”

“Magpies. Thirteen probably.”

Romeo’s face cracked with a smile, then he laughed, a boom of a sound that echoed across the outhouse. “You made me laugh.”

Chad pressed his hand to his chest. “I feel honored.”

“Come on, tell me what you think about Candice’s revelations.”

“We have a motive, or more of a motive than ‘sisters sometimes fight’.”

“Love rivals,” Romeo mused, plucking Gavin’s photograph off the board.

He certainly had the shaggy haired mullet and bad boy look going on with his ripped at the arms vest, and the cigarette poking from his lips. He’d gone for a smoldering expression in the photograph.

“Is that a barbed wire necklace he’s wearing?”

Chad nodded. “I think so.”

“They both wanted *this*?”

“Hey, my crush when I was sixteen was Arnold Fritz.”

Romeo’s head snapped up. “Arnold Fritz, lead singer of that terrible punk rock band *Snake and Spikes*?”

Chad pressed his lips together not to laugh at the outrage in Romeo’s voice.

“They weren’t terrible.”

“They were awful, Chad.” Romeo twisted around to glare. “I’m having doubts about this.”

“About what?”

“You and me if you had a thing for Arnold Fritz.”

“What was wrong with him?”

“He looked like he’d *never* had a shower, his hair was matted, he was always stoned, and barely lucid, and there was more vocal talent in a crinkling crisp packet.”

“Wow.” Chad chuckled. “You either really hated Arnold Fritz or really hate that I just admitted I used to have a crush on him. When I was *sixteen*.”

“It’s both.”

Chad shrugged. “He was a bad boy, and openly bisexual.”

“You didn’t buy a magazine with his picture in it so you could get off to him, right?”

“Like I could afford magazines.” Chad shook his head. He bit his lip, before muttering nonchalant, “I had to steal the poster out of one in the shop.”

“You better be joking.”

Romeo kept staring at him until Chad couldn’t hold in his smile.

“You are joking,” Romeo slumped. “Good.”

“About the poster, not about the crush.”

“I guess I should thank him.”

“Why?”

“You being into bad boys is probably what led to this,” Romeo gestured between them, then raised his eyebrow.

“It’s a little different.”

“I don’t think you can get worse than a serial killer. You’ve hit the big leagues now, Chad.”

“Are you done trying to make me feel uncomfortable?”

Romeo’s eyes narrowed, and a knowing smile spread his lips. “You love it.”

“All I meant was being sixteen, raging hormones and confusion, someone like Gavin Hargreaves who was comfortable being himself would be attractive.”

“I understand, I think, but Arnold Fritz is still on my hit list.”

“Hit list?”

Romeo hummed. “People *I* want to kill, not for the monster, but for me and if the opportunity arises, I’m doing so with or without your consent.”

Chad folded his arms. “Is this a long list?”

“Four names.”

“Which are?”

“Holly Stevenson for running your name through the mud, that barman, Dean, for thinking he can save you from me, Vincent Whitehall for whatever *this* currently is, and now Arnold Fritz for being your teenage crush.”

Chad sighed. “Okay. Fine—”

“Fine? As in everyone on that list I can kill?”

“Dean didn’t do anything wrong.”

Romeo tutted. “Not this again.”

“He was looking out for me, Romeo.”

“He doesn’t need to look out for you, you’ve got me, that’s the point. I look out for you. He was some meddling barman sticking his nose in where it wasn’t welcome, and it riled me.”

“Okay,” Chad stepped over to him, and pressed his hands on Romeo’s chest. Romeo’s heart thundered beneath his palm, “but he doesn’t deserve to die.”

“With or without your consent … and I’m going to goddamn enjoy it more than the others.”

“Thought you didn’t have a bias?”

“I didn’t until emotion got involved.”

“Are we going to move on, or are you going to keep threatening to kill Dean?”

“I guess we should move on, but know that I think about it.”

“It’s been noted,” Chad said. He turned his attention back to the board. “So, both sisters had a crush on Gavin, but Gavin only had eyes for Harriet. They date, which would’ve bothered Lucy, and once that relationship came to an end, Gavin decided to leave Little Wren, and the county of Bardhum and move in with his dad in Portsmouth.”

“She lost Gavin twice. Once when he chose Harriet over her, and again when he left after they broke up.”

“That surely would’ve stirred up some animosity between sisters. That’s our motive.”

“Next up, opportunity.”

Chad nodded. “In the official report, Lucy got off the bus outside the farm gate at 5:00. She told her father Harriet was staying over at her friend’s house, and didn’t leave until 1:30 the next day when a search party was organized. Harriet was reported missing at 12:30.”

“But you found out that was a lie. Lucy left the farm at some point that evening and drove down the route Harriet would have been walking. How long to walk three miles?”

“At least an hour. There’s an hour of opportunity for their paths to have crossed, but what are we suggesting happened? Lucy killed her sister, managed to dump the body somewhere no one has found her, then turned up at her friend’s house?”

Romeo knocked his shoulder into Chad’s. “It’s not impossible.”

“No, but it’s implausible, especially without help. They were about the same height, same build. If they got into a physical fight there would have been some sign of it on Lucy, on her face, her arms, her clothes.”

“Are you forgetting she was driving a truck?”

“There would’ve been evidence on that, too—blood, a smashed headlight*, something*. For nine months, officers could only speculate this had something to do with the serial killer they were hunting. Her family were questioned. They must’ve looked at other suspects, including Lucy, but there’s nothing in Harriet’s file. The only suspect they had was James and they released him.”

“What about Candice?”

Chad frowned. “What about her?”

“She could’ve helped Lucy. If Lucy killed Harriet, even if by accident, maybe Candice helped dispose of the body. Maybe they were in it together and that’s why she reacted so strongly to your questions.”

“What did they do with her? It’s not easy to get rid of the body.”

Romeo glanced back. “We manage okay.”

“We’re in a secluded location and no one is searching for our … our…”

“Poppy feed?”

Chad grimaced. “I hate that you call them that.”

“What would you prefer? Victims?”

“No,” Chad rubbed his brow. “They’re not victims, they’re … I don’t know, it’s not important right now.” He sighed. “The point is people were

searching for Harriet. They started searching at Hastings farm just in case she had hurt herself walking back and had fallen unconscious somewhere. There were hundreds of volunteers, and dogs involved in the search, and they found nothing. Nothing. No clothing. No jewelry, no school bag. She'd just vanished. Somewhere between Melbourn Spring and Hastings Farm, she disappeared."

"Candice said herself, Lucy and she were driving around in the truck that morning. They didn't join the search on the ground. Why not?"

"I don't know," Chad whispered. He pulled the whiteboard pen from the clip, and circled James's face. "I still need to get his side of what happened that night."

"Have you tried the Romeo and Juliet tactic yet?"

"Sure, because that'll work." Chad rolled his eyes. "I tell him I'm in love with a serial killer in the hope he tells me he's in love with a teenage choir singer, and we can bond over messed up love stories that might not even be real."

Romeo narrowed his eyes before tugging Chad into his arms. "Ours is real."

"I didn't mean—"

"And don't you forget it."

Romeo tipped Chad's head back for a bruising kiss.

Chapter Thirteen

"Do you really think this will work?" Chad asked, peeking a look out of the window.

"Yes," James hissed, and yanked Chad out of sight by his shirt collar. "If you don't get seen."

James's black sedan and an escort of three marked police cars and two motorbikes took off from the car park at speed. James paced reception back and forth until the slap of his shoes began to grate on Chad's nerves. Lucy sat on a plastic chair, tugging her bottom lip.

"They bought it," Lynn confirmed. Unlike Chad who'd been yanked from the window, James allowed her to look.

James's decoy plan had worked, and the press had taken the bait and packed up their things to pursue the black sedan.

"No escort?" Chad asked.

James stopped. "I'm sure we can handle Vincent."

"Is the superintendent okay with this?"

"The superintendent just wants us to find Harriet. Whatever we have to do to achieve that he's happy to turn a blind eye to as long as we get the result we want."

Lucy snorted drawing James's glare.

"Sorry," she said, covering her mouth. "The result you *want*, sounds like the police, out for themselves. As usual."

"We're ready for Vincent." James told Lynn, before speaking to Chad. "I'll meet you in the car."

"Where am I going?" Lucy asked. "I'm not sitting in the middle seat. I don't want to be up close and personal with the man that killed my sister."

"You can follow behind us in your truck." James replied before hurrying out of reception.

Chad knew it would take time for Lynn and Pauline to get Vinicent ready, time he could spend alone with James. He sighed, pushing to his feet. The Romeo and Juliet tactic. James seemed more likely to cave Chad's face in than open up about his relationship with Harriet, but he had to at least try.

He paused. "Lynn, have you got that list for me yet?"

Lynn stiffened. "Almost."

"Almost?"

She didn't meet his eye.

"What list?" Lucy asked.

Chad frowned at Lynn's obvious avoidance. "I asked for a list of Vincent's contacts. People he wrote to, called, had visit him."

"Why do you want to know that?" Lucy bit her lip. "In case he told them something about Harriet?"

"Yeah," he shrugged. "So I can contact them to ask for information."

Lucy nodded. "That sounds smart."

"I better help Pauline with Vincent." Lynn said, avoiding the topic entirely.

Lucy fished her keys out of her pocket. "James better drive sensibly today."

"He will," Chad promised, holding the door for her.

They strolled across the car park in silence. Lucy shot him a small smile as she climbed in her truck, and Chad took a deep breath, approaching James.

James sat in the driver's seat with his head in his hands. He shot up when Chad opened the door, and got in next to him.

"I honestly don't know why it takes them so long to get him." James pressed back in his seat. "They should just … throw him in here and let me *make* him tell us."

"I don't think the superintendent could turn a blind eye to that."

James smirked. "You'd tell him, would you?" He looked up at Chad. "Even if we got the result, you'd tell him the means I used to get it?"

Chad didn't answer.

"Pauline would, that's for sure. I don't know how that woman can look after him."

"She's doing her job."

James drummed his fingers against the wheel. "You know, I'd still do it."

"Do what?"

"Beat a location out him—"

"James—"

"DI Poole," James growled. "You made it quite clear you didn't want to be on friendly terms. And if I thought I could beat a location out of him, I would, but the fact is, I don't think I can. I don't think he'd tell me. The last

drive, with him … talking about my daughter," he filled up with a deep breath before easing it out, "it proved to me he's a lot more *with it* than I first thought. This is a game to him."

Chad swallowed. "I told you that. I told you he had no intention of giving us anything."

"Well, I didn't believe you, all right, and now we've got to save face, and go along with this until we run out the clock, do what he wants for the slimmest chance he *might* give us something. We're in it for the 1% chance of finding her, but it doesn't mean I like the idea of sitting in a car with him. It doesn't mean I don't want to reach into the backseat and strangle him, because I do, and I'd rather not be observed by the press while I battle with myself not to."

"James—DI Poole," Chad corrected, crunching his toes in his shoes. "You were the last person to see Harriet alive. I have to ask, what was she doing in your car?"

"You've read my statement, no doubt. I was cautioning her for possession."

"Michael and Lucy seem to believe—"

"Oh, I've heard all about you getting pally with Michael…"

"I visited him."

James snorted. "Nice to know who's side you're on."

"I'm on nobody's side. They have their opinion, and I have mine."

"And what do you think, Chad? Am I the predatory pedophile protected by the badge on my chest?"

"So far that's the only explanation I've been given over your past behavior. If you could tell me—"

"I don't need to prove my innocence, to you least of all."

"I know. I'm not asking for your innocence. I just want the truth. Your truth."

"No one ever wanted to hear my truth."

"I thought I was in love once," Chad began. James tensed beside him, but didn't interrupt. "It was safe, comfortable, and I could've spent my life like that. It would've been a hell of a lot less painful if I'd just have stayed in that numb bubble forever, but I'm so glad I didn't. The pain, the humiliation, the times where I physically wanted to rip my own brain from my skull was all worth it to feel love. Real love."

James shifted his focus to Chad. His eyes were cold, and hard, but he didn't snarl or interrupt, he waited for Chad to continue.

"And I've never told anyone. Never admitted how I felt because no one would understand, they couldn't possibly, they'd not even give me a chance to explain it, they cast me out, and you'll hate me for it, you'll probably scream at me to get out the car, but I'm going to say it anyway. I fell in love with Romeo Knight in that farmhouse."

"He was a serial killer."

"But he was also Romeo, and I fell in love with him. He burst the numb bubble I'd built around myself. He listened to me. He was there for me. And maybe if I'd have been stronger, it wouldn't have happened, but it did."

James leaned away from him, pressing into the door of the car, he twisted his body to face Chad, and looked at him, *really looked*, then he laughed, a rumbly mocking laugh that lifted the hair at Chad's nape.

"Seriously?" James sneered.

"What?"

"I know what you're trying to do Chad. You're trying to find out about me and Harriet, but fuck me," he shuddered. "Telling me you loved Romeo Knight, that's seriously messed up to compare the two. He was a fucking monster, a psychopath who murdered innocent people for the thrill of it, and you're trying to pull comparisons?"

Chad looked away. "I just—I understand what it feels like to care about someone you know you shouldn't."

James chuckled, "You're continuing with this? Are you serious? I wasn't searching for a victim, I didn't kidnap Harriet and brainwash her in the hope she'd love me, or am I *you* in your messed up comparison, Chad? Was I in a numb bubble and she was there to pop it for me? She was the one who manipulated me?"

"Forget it," Chad snapped. "I was just trying to understand."

"I cautioned her for possession—"

"You are lying," Chad shouted. "You picked her up from school that day and drove her to Melbourn Spring. You'd been sending her gifts—"

"Gifts? Name me one. One gift."

Chad couldn't. But he was angry and James's smug smile only made it worse.

“You waited around the church after her choir practice. You were obsessed with her, and Michael tried to get you to back off, Harriet told you to leave her alone.”

James shook his head. “Michael made her go to the station with him. She didn’t want to report me.”

“She was afraid of you.”

“No! She wasn’t. She liked me, and I liked her, and yeah, it was fucked up. I’d buried my daughter, and my wife was barely talking to me, and Harriet was seventeen. All we did was talk. And maybe I wanted more, and maybe she did, too, but it never happened.”

“Why was she in your car?”

“I told her it had to stop. Whatever was happening between us, it had to stop before it truly started. It was already a mess. I’d been warned off her at work, and Michael had run a smear campaign against me, making fliers about the pedophile on the police force and handing them out at every school in Bardhum.” He took a deep breath. “My wife needed me, and I’d been selfish, I’d been flattered getting attention from this pretty seventeen-year-old. That was all it was. I didn’t love her. That’s not what this has all been about.” He gestured to the prison. “She was upset and left the car. I went after her, but she screamed at me to let her go. She said if I didn’t, she’d go to her dad and they’d drive to the station and report me, and she’d make sure I was arrested, so I backed off. I got in my car, and I drove straight home to my wife. It was my fault she was walking alone on that road. I put her in the path of that monster.”

The reception doors opened, and Chad spotted Lynn wheeling Vincent over to them. Pauline walked beside them, stern faced, with her bag of equipment over one of her shoulders.

“But to compare me and Harriet, to you and Romeo to get your answers, that’s low, and I hope they were just foolish words, in a desperate attempt to know about us, because if they weren’t, if you really did fall for a psychopathic serial killer and you’re some kind of sympathizer,” he tilted his head to the window, nodding at Wiltknot, “I’ll do everything in my power to make sure you end up in there with the rest of the animals.”

The back passenger door opened. Lynn helped get Vincent onto the backseat, then slammed the door. Pauline jogged around to the other side and climbed in.

“Didn’t interrupt something, did I?” Vincent asked.

Chad inwardly cursed, and glanced at James, but he didn’t meet Chad’s eyes.

James stabbed his keys into the ignition and twisted. “As it happens, you did miss a bit of a bombshell.”

Chad tensed. “James—”

“DI Poole,” James corrected. “Chad here told me he was in love with Romeo Knight. You know, the psychopathic serial killer who kidnapped him.”

Chad squeezed his eyes shut, inwardly counting to ten.

“That was obvious,” Vincent murmured. “I assumed everyone knew.”

Chad opened his eyes, and turned to look at Vincent.

Vincent smiled. “But what I’ve always wondered is whether Romeo loves him back.”

“Of course he didn’t.” James snorted. “How could he?”

“Quite right, DI Poole. Psychopaths can’t love, they can’t feel, but they’re very good at manipulating naïve people into thinking they can.”

Then he smiled his devil’s smile, directing it right at Chad.

****

Magpies.

Chad hated them, but they made it impossible not to look, clucking and cawing down at their car from the trees. When Chad looked out the side mirror he spotted Lucy’s truck, and her anxious face peeking above the steering wheel.

Melbourn Spring was somewhat of a beauty spot, set back in the trees, a pool of clear water, so clear condom wrappers could be seen on the stones at the bottom. Vincent had only made it to the edge of the spring with Pauline’s help. He’d slid down his nose canula and taken a deep breath of fresh air. The absolute wonder on his face as he gazed around made Chad feel like he encroached on a *private* moment.

The look didn’t last, though, Vincent had slumped, and hastily shoved the tube back under his nose before Pauline helped him back to the car. Lucy hadn’t left her truck. Chad and James followed Vincent, and then sat in silence while Pauline dosed Vincent up on more morphine on the back seat.

“I remember driving along here.” Vincent pointed out the windscreen, and James started the engine.

“Here?” James pressed.

His voice had softened since Vincent had started to *remember* things. Chad zoned them out, and let James and Vincent talk back and forth without comment. He picked up on a few bits, like Vincent remembering Harriet leaning against the huge oak tree beside the road. How she’d been reluctant at first, but he charmed her, told her he was the swimming coach for St Mary’s, and it wasn’t safe for young women to be walking around on their own. He’d killed her, and drove her back to his house which had been long ago knocked down, and a developer bought the land for cheap, and built an office block on top.

Conveniently, when it got to what happened next—what he did with her body— Vincent grew tired and asked to be driven back to Wiltknot.

James didn’t kick off like Chad expected. He nodded, fully pulled back in by Vincent and his cooperation during the drive. Silver tongued. Chad didn’t know who’d first used the term for Vincent, but it had stuck for a reason.

“What the hell?” James mumbled, slowing the car to a stop. The ones in front of them were awkwardly reversing, turning around, and driving off. Chad could spy the bridge in the distance, a car askew between the flashing police lights.

“Road’s closed.” Chad said, spotting the sign propped up, and the police officer beside it in hi-vis, circling his finger in a gesture for everyone to turn around.

James ignored the gesture and drove up to him. “We need to get through.”

“No. You need to turn around and find an alternate route.”

James gritted his teeth, reaching into the side of his door, he pulled out his ID and showed it to the officer. “This is the most direct route to Wiltknot. We need to get through,” James waved a flippant hand, “we’ll drive on the hard shoulder if we need to while you clear the road.”

The officer paled. He glanced back. “I’m sorry, sir, but that won’t be possible.”

Chad flung open his door, and got out. He frowned at the police cars in the distance, their blue lights strobed in the darkness.

“What’s happened?” Chad asked.

“Someone … jumped.”

Chad looked back up the road to the blue lights flashing against the bridge.

“My sergeant told me to close the road while we wait for the ambulance.”

“Ambulance?” Pauline gasped. She tried her handle, only to curse at the locks James had on in the back before clambering onto Chad’s seat and leaving the car that way.

“I’m a nurse.”

The officer nodded. “I don’t think there’s much you can do—”

Pauline took off down the road with her shoulder bag swinging.

“I’m going to check it out,” James said, unbuckling himself. “You stay here with Vincent.”

“I’d prefer if—”

“I’m your superior, Chad. Get back in the car.”

Chad slumped, dropping back into his seat. He closed his door, then winced when James slammed his shut. James didn’t take off in a sprint like Pauline had, he strolled closer to the flashing blues like he was enjoying a casual walk.

“Alone again at last.”

Chad ignored Vincent and adjusted the mirror to see Lucy behind him.

“DI Poole was eating up my every word today, but not you, not Chad Fuller. You weren’t listening at all.”

“I’ll listen when you say something interesting.”

“These little trips, our meetings. I’ve found them quite enjoyable.”

“I’m glad someone has.”

“Why did you break your promise?”

Chad exhaled through his nose. “I didn’t want to see you.”

“*Want* doesn’t come into it. We made a deal. I helped you save Shawn. If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t have gotten to him in time… I read that you gave him CPR until an ambulance arrived.”

Chad found Vincent’s glare in the mirror. “What is this whole spectacle about?”

“I wasn’t the one who turned it into a spectacle.”

“You went to the press.”

“I can assure you I didn’t. I don’t *go* to the press. They come to me, and they beg, plead and bribe me to give them something, but they get nothing from me. Someone else got them involved.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“The why is obvious. I’m angry at you for not visiting, but what is *this* exactly?”

“You talk in riddles.”

Vincent leaned between the seats. His spine creaked, and he took an extra wheeze of oxygen. “I’ll make my words plain enough for you to understand. Four words.”

“Four words?”

“Will bring about your downfall.”

Chad frowned. “Let’s hear them? Do your worst.”

“I’m not ready to speak them yet,” Vincent held up four fingers for Chad to see. “But that’s all it’s going to take. Four words that will poison your life forever. That is how I win.”

Chapter Fourteen

"*Four words that will poison your life forever."*

Chad could think of a few.

I know your secrets.

Romeo Knight is alive.

Romeo doesn't love you.

He can't love you.

You'll never be enough.

Chad tightened his fist into the cushion on his lap.

Damn Vincent Whitehall and his smug sneer and laughing eyes. Chad wanted … oh, God, he *needed* Romeo to—

"Four words?" Romeo repeated. "Four words to bring about your downfall."

Chad nodded from where he lay out on the sofa. Romeo had his arms folded and beat a finger against the bulge of one of his biceps. He'd been tense since Chad had first retold his conversation with Vincent, unconsciously showcasing all his muscle as if a threat lay on the horizon.

He looked, in a word, dangerous, and Chad's throat tightened.

They fell into silence again with Romeo staring out of the window, and Chad laying on his back trying his hardest to keep his thoughts away from Romeo's hands and all the wonderful and terrible things they could do.

But he was angry, and frustrated, and he failed to keep his damning thoughts at bay.

"Tell me again." Romeo's voice startled Chad's mind back to the present. He'd been drifting, swept away with thoughts of Romeo wrapping his hands around Vincent's neck and squeezing until his eyes teased falling from their sockets.

His blood rushed south at such a thought.

Four words. Romeo wouldn't let him speak *any* given the chance. Four gurgles maybe. Four gasps of breaths if Chad asked Romeo to drag it out.

He knew Romeo would if he asked.

"Chad!"

Chad avoided Romeo's gaze, but the snap in his voice said he wasn't satisfied with his recollection.

"Tell me exactly what you said, and what he said back."

"Again?" Chad groaned and shifted the cushion conveniently placed over his crotch. He hit a new low, getting hard just thinking about Romeo strangling someone.

It wasn't a memory, it was a fantasy. He was fantasizing about Romeo's hands on someone, trapping their last breath inside their chest until they ran out of oxygen.

"Yes! And stop kneading that cushion."

Romeo grabbed it and threw it across the room. Chad snatched up another one, and hugged it to himself, blushing furiously.

"Can't we just … you know, watch something on TV or go to bed—"

"No."

Romeo sat down on the coffee table maintaining his arms crossed posture, his spine taut, body ready for Vincent to fly through the door. His fingers were no longer splayed casually over his biceps. They were squeezing, even his tapping finger had stopped in favor of strangling his arms.

"Romeo, I've already told you five times."

Five times Chad had repeated what had happened with Vincent, and each time Romeo had brooded over the retelling, staring at nothing while his stiff, straining body had robbed Chad of logical thought.

"Yes, but each time there's slight discrepancies."

Chad crossed his arms, not in a macho display, his muscles were laughable compared to Romeo's, but he knotted them together in a sign of offense. His memory wasn't the problem. His frustration over Vincent had latched on to Romeo and turned into a different kind, but that didn't mean he couldn't accurately recall what he said.

He was a detective with an eye for detail and the memory to match.

"Like what?" he asked.

"Well. When you said, 'Let's hear them?' did you say to Vincent to do his worst, or to do his best?"

"Worst—"

"Are you sure? The second time you told me you said best."

“I said do your worst.” Chad looked away. “And he had this smug assed look in his eye like he could see the fucking future, like I was an idiot for not being able to see it, too.” Chad reached down for the magpie cushion. He sunk his nails into it. “And before the drive, when he mentioned you, he used the present tense, like he knew. Like he *knows*.”

“He doesn’t. It was a stab at you, that’s all.”

“A stab?”

Romeo hummed. “Like he did with James and his daughter, a little stab to see what reaction he could get. He probably wanted you to correct him, that way it would’ve reminded you that I, the man you were unfortunate enough to fall in love with, was dead and you were responsible for it.”

Chad sat up so fast he got a headrush. “My fault? How the hell is it my fault?”

“You’re the reason I got locked up, escaped, and concluded my countdown with Marc. I committed suicide because I’d finished what I’d started. Hence, your fault—”

“Hey, wait just a minute—”

“Chad. You do know I’m not actually dead, right?”

“Yeah, well.” He collapsed back down. “I still don’t like the assumption that you’re dead because of me, even if it’s not true.”

Romeo allowed a small smile. He relaxed his death hold on his biceps a fraction.

“And what was it he said, ‘Psychopaths can’t love, they can’t feel…”

“They’re just very good at manipulating naïve people into thinking they do.” Chad finished. He stopped tracing the magpie picture on the cushion when another lapse of silence fell over them. This time, he didn’t get a chance for his mind to wander, not with Romeo frowning at him.

“What?” Chad asked. “What have I done now?”

“Psychopaths can’t love, they can’t feel, but they’re very good at manipulating naïve people into thinking they can. That’s what you told me he said the first time—”

“And that’s what I said.”

“No. You changed *can* for *do*.”

“Christ,” Chad growled, rolling into the back of the sofa. Romeo clutched Chad by the shoulder and pulled him back again so they were

looking at each other, albeit Chad struggled to meet Romeo's dark gaze.

"It means the same thing," Chad whispered.

"No, it doesn't."

Romeo delivered his most pressing glare. The one that left Chad feeling like an insignificant bug that he was contemplating stepping on. Chad avoided it, staring down at the cushion he crushed to his body while trying to work out the difference between a can and a do, and whether he *could* remember which one Vincent had said anymore.

It was a little difficult with his cock demanding attention and his mind happy to drift back to thoughts of Vincent's death.

"Do you want to me to explain it to you?"

Romeo's words were slow, and tinged with frustration, but they didn't help Chad solve the sudden riddle that had reared its ugly head. The heat of his glare, the slow drawl of his words—Chad knew he was pissed, he even knew what had made him annoyed, but didn't understand why.

He exhaled. "I think you need to."

Chad regretted glancing Romeo's way when his nostrils flared, and the scar by his eye twitched.

"They're very good at convincing naïve people they can. Vincent attacked you and Tate in that stab for a reaction. Both of you grew attached to a serial killer. Both believed that a serial killer cared about you."

"Yes. I understood his perceived insult. His comparison of me and Tate and how I was as naive as a teenager. Thanks for explaining it to me…"

"By changing can to a do you made it present, you made it about us … us now." Romeo gestured to Chad with his chin. "This."

Chad's brain spun. He let go of the cushion while shaking his head.

"No—"

"Psychopaths can't love, they manipulate people into thinking they do. Do, Chad. You said do. Present tense. You were talking about me."

Chad groaned, sitting up. He swiveled and put both his feet on the floor. "Romeo," he placed his hands on Romeo's knees. "You're wrong. I wasn't accusing you of manipulating
me—"

"Why not?" Romeo tilted his head. "I'm a psychopath after all."

Chad didn't shy from the darkness in Romeo's eyes. He stared into it, undeterred. Those storm clouds were *his* storm clouds, and he knew the difference, he knew when Romeo's monstrous needs took over, and when he was just pissed.

"One who enjoys killing people," Romeo continued, "and I have everything I could ever want to be satisfied. A home. Money. Sex. And I get to kill people because my boyfriend is too naïve to realize I don't love him. I make him think I do to get what I want. This is my master plan. It only took you a few years to work it out."

"Stop it," Chad said firmly. "I know you love me, Romeo."

Romeo stiffened his jaw. His expression remained emotionless.

"Or maybe I'm just good at being a psychopath."

"Okay." Chad rolled his eyes. "You keep telling yourself that." He brushed his hands up Romeo's legs until he could grip his waist. "We both know it's a lie."

He leaned in, but Romeo swerved from the kiss, and spoke by Chad's ear. "Why then, have you struggled to look at me for the past hour?"

Chad swallowed. He retracted his arms from sneaking around Romeo's waist and flopped back against the sofa. "Fuck."

"Yeah," Romeo growled. "Fuck. You said you weren't going to let him in your head, and one comment is all it took?"

"He is in my head, but not for that reason."

"Why is he there then? Why say do instead of can?"

Chad scrubbed a hand over his mouth. "Because…"

"Because what?"

"I've repeated mine and Vincent's conversation five times, and it was a slip up, an innocent slip of a word. That's all."

"But subconsciously—"

"No, there is no *subconsciously*. I was distracted, that's all." He pushed to his feet, and rested his hands on Romeo's shoulders. He shook him. "That's all it was. I love you, you love me—"

"Then why are you about to leave the room?"

Chad glanced at the door. "Because I know the next questions will be 'distracted with what'…"

"I already know. You told me. Vincent is in your head, but not in the way I thought. Whatever the hell that means."

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Chad…”

“If I tell you, do you promise to lighten up?”

“No. But you should tell me anyway.”

“I was distracted with the thought of you killing him,” Chad said to the door. “And the whole time I was thinking about it and … I had a … *reaction* and then it was difficult to concentrate on recalling exactly what he said when I was imaging you strangling him.”

Romeo didn’t say anything. No inappropriate comment, no pressing for more information, not even a laugh. Chad shifted from one foot to the other, still watching the door. Even that felt like it was judging him.

“So … are you good to take Merc out for his toilet? Because I’m exhausted.”

He side-stepped away from Romeo, expecting to be yanked back or bullied against the wall, but Romeo sat frozen on the coffee table, and Chad rushed out of the room, leaving the door open in his haste. His admission had stunned a serial killer. He’d left Romeo speechless, and as he paused on the stairs, waiting for Romeo to come barreling after him, his breaths came in pants, and panic clawed at him.

He hadn’t been lying on the sofa remembering Romeo killing people and their hot sex afterwards, and he hadn’t been thinking about erotic asphyxiation in porn. He’d been fantasizing about Romeo killing Vincent, moving them both around in his head like pawns and turning himself on while he lay on the sofa.

Vincent’s suffering.

Romeo’s pleasure.

Chad’s thrill of watching Vincent die.

Not to mention, what him and Romeo would do to each other afterwards while Vincent’s dead body lay on the floor.

He sat on the top step and listened as Romeo took Merc out the kitchen door. Time jumped while he leaned his head on the wall, and he blinked at the vibration of the back door slamming.

“Night, Merc,” Romeo murmured, shutting him in the kitchen. Then Chad tensed as Romeo strode past the stairs, not noticing Chad sat at the top, and locked the front door. He didn’t startle when he turned to face him.

Chad had learned long ago that startling Romeo was near enough impossible, but he did pause.

"I'm messed up, aren't I?" Chad said.

"You surprise me with new things that make you perfect."

"Me fantasizing about you killing people makes me perfect."

"Yes. For me it does."

Chad snorted, picking plaster from the wall.

Romeo didn't complain about the flakes dropping down.

"I really hate him, Romeo."

"I know," the stairs creaked as he made his approach, "and I wish I could kill him for you."

"I wish that, too."

"But right now, I'll settle for you imagining me doing it." He held his hand out to Chad. He took it and was yanked to his feet. "We can have fun with that."

"But—"

"No buts, Chad."

Romeo stepped past him, still gripping Chad's hand and led him into the bedroom.

****

Romeo wanted Chad to share the fantasy.

Speak it out loud while they touched each other.

He tried, but shame gagged Chad from revealing it, and Romeo didn't force the words from him. He could've. He could've played dirty and worked Chad over until he was desperate and had no choice but to crack open his depraved mind and let Romeo see, but he didn't push. Chad had Romeo on his back. Romeo pulled him down to kiss, and stroke, and touch until Chad was sweat covered and aching.

He struggled free of Romeo's arms, and sat up to set about worshipping what had spawned his fantasy in the first place.

He gnawed Romeo's knuckles, nipping his way up to his fingertips before kissing them. Kissing became sucking, and he sucked each finger deep before moving on to lick and kiss across Romeo's palms. Romeo didn't comment on Chad's obsession with his hands, but he grinned, pleased that Chad had trouble leaving them alone.

Chad led one to his cock and let Romeo jerk him until he was close.

“Enough foreplay,” Chad panted, yanking Romeo’s wrist until he let go.

He took a minute to catch his breath, staring down at Romeo beneath him, his chest glistening and his eyes on fire.

Romeo preferred control, but occasionally he allowed Chad to be on top of him. He could and *would* flip position if the need to have a helpless Chad got too much, so Chad took what he could for as long as Romeo let him have it.

He shifted onto his knees and reached behind himself with spit covered fingers.

Romeo’s gaze was locked on Chad’s eyes as he speared himself open. He sat up and wrapped his arms around Chad’s back, stilling his hand. “Slower, Chad.”

“But—”

“Slower,” Romeo said with a clear *no arguments* in his voice. He wiped spit across his fingers before slapping Chad’s hand aside.

Chad shivered, and his cock leaked as Romeo’s warm thick fingers penetrated him. His touch was maddeningly slow, but Chad didn’t dare protest in case he stopped. Romeo rewetted his fingers, then held them beneath Chad’s mouth for him to add his own spit to use.

They could’ve used lube. The bottle sat on the bedside table, but Chad’s thoughts had been too depraved and damning for lube. He didn’t want anything synthetic between them, just them raw and using each other’s bodies to excite and pleasure each other.

Romeo let Chad take over and brought his hand to the front to squeeze Chad’s pec. He leaned up to suck a pert nipple into his mouth as Chad bucked against him.

“You can’t do that,” Chad murmured.

His leaking cock left a wet trail across Romeo’s belly button.

“Why not?”

Romeo kissed his way along to the other nipple before licking it. The hardened nub trembled when he sucked.

“Too much,” Chad groaned.

Romeo released the nipple, easing back with a self-satisfied smirk.

A breathless laugh escaped Chad. He glanced down at his drooling cock. “I’m ready.”

“Are you sure? I think another ten minutes of our fingers—”

“If you put your fingers anywhere near my hole right now, I will come all over you.”

“It’s tempting—”

“No, Romeo,” Chad shoved him in the chest until he fell back on the mattress, snorting.

“It’s really not.” Chad hated the shrillness to his voice, but coming like that wouldn’t satisfy him, not when he was that wound up.

He lifted onto his knees and took a rough hold of Romeo cock.

“Careful,” Romeo warned, smirking.

“Shut up,” Chad breathed. He sat himself down slowly, whimpering as Romeo’s cock pushed against him.

It hurt.

He wasn’t ready.

Chad rose, dropping more spit onto his hand. His desperation spilled over, and Romeo beneath him looked beyond pleased. Chad tried again, taking Romeo into his body. It was slow going, Chad shivering at every tantalizing millimeter his body devoured. Romeo watched himself go in, slack mouthed, then he groaned when Chad bottomed out.

“I love being inside you,” Romeo cursed softly.

His eyes slid shut, and Chad couldn’t resist the weight on his own lids as he closed his eyes too and focused on the sensation of being stuffed full of Romeo. He jolted when Romeo squeezed his thighs hard enough to leave bruises. His hands. Chad looked down at them clutching his skin as he started to move his hips. They tightened on him, applying more pressure to his legs until they ached.

Of course, Romeo had reopened his eyes and noticed Chad staring at his hands, riding harder and faster as their hold intensified.

Chad grinded on the cock deep inside him, never pulling off, but rocking his hips forward and back to press and tug Romeo’s cock at the right angles.

“I need…” Chad bit his lip.

“What do you need?” Romeo asked.

“Your hand on me. Your hand squeezing me.”

Romeo let go of Chad’s thigh and reached for his cock.

Chad’s eyebrows twitched. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“I know,” Romeo exhaled softly, and sat up. He pushed one hand against Chad’s lower back to keep him steady and took hold of Chad’s throat with the other. Chad moaned, riding Romeo harder before his fingers had even begun to tighten. He couldn’t help it—it was the anticipation of the feeling that almost pushed him over.

A battle raged in Romeo’s eyes. His desire pitted against his uncertainty. He relished being in control, but there was a part of him he couldn’t tame, and Chad shamelessly put his throat in Romeo’s hand and teased it.

“Keep going,” Chad gasped. “Even if I pass out, keep going.”

“Chad…”

“Please, Romeo. I want you to. I want to come back to you fucking me.”

Romeo’s hand was steel against his throat, digging in until Chad began to tingle all over. The bedroom turned monochrome before closing in on the fixed point of one of Romeo’s eyes. Chad could see his reflection in the black orb, open mouthed, and shivering. His hips and knees weakened, the sudden heaviness building in his bones made it difficult to move on Romeo’s cock. Romeo picked up the slack as Chad lost it until it was all Romeo fucking up into him while Chad’s head filled with fuzz. His prostate took a pounding, and his cock twitched, threatening to go over. Romeo adjusted his hand, pressing the side of his thumb into Chad’s neck, disrupting the flow of blood. Warmth rushed under his skin, filling his head until he couldn’t see Romeo’s eyes anymore.

The lights had gone out. He heard him, though, the change in Romeo’s breathing, his cursing as Chad began to drift out of reach.

“Romeo,” he whispered, but the sound strangled out of him as the world was swept away in dark pleasure.

Chad came to with a gasp.

Every nerve in his body fired at the same moment bringing him from drowsy and confused to shockingly aware in an instant. He squeezed his eyes shut and grit his teeth. The moan that escaped him vibrated as it passed them, rushing from his mouth and tingling his lips.

If the pleasure that had swept over him before had been black and numbing, this was its opposite, bright and electrified. Chad shivered,

jerking uncontrollably, and he tried to stop himself by digging his fingers into hard flesh and pressing his face into a sweaty neck.

Romeo was saying his name—not saying, but groaning it, and cursing it and pressing it into his skin with sticky lips. Chad moaned again, another long one that came from somewhere deep and left his lungs aching, and his mouth buzzing. It sounded like someone else's—or *something*, something primal and overwhelmed.

He was moving, being thrust upwards by strong thighs, and thrust into by a hard cock, and he was taking the best kind of beating. The harsh fire in his nerves began to rescind, until it was just one area still pulsating deep inside him, still taking a beating he was utterly helpless to stop.

He chanted Romeo's name, clutching onto his shoulders as he came hard between them. Romeo turned his head, finding Chad's lips. Chad groaned his orgasm into Romeo's mouth, whimpering as Romeo's cock kept hitting him in just the right spot.

They swallowed each other's moans and whimpers as Romeo came undone inside Chad's body a few seconds later.

Chad peaked first, but his orgasm lasted longer, twitching his cock and wracking his body with shivers. Romeo pinned Chad to his chest, stroking his hand up and down his back while he waited for his body to stop threatening to fall to pieces. He slumped when the afterglow released its hold, and fell into Romeo, weak and panting. His head, pleasantly disjointed like he'd taken whiskey shots in quick succession but without the burn in his throat, or the nausea in his stomach. The world shifted in strange ways. He kept a tight hold of Romeo.

"Fuck," Chad breathed against him. He nuzzled his face into Romeo's sweat covered chest. It wasn't just sweat he'd mashed his face into, but his own come rushing between Romeo's pecs. "Fuck, Romeo."

"Fuck indeed," Romeo replied, his own voice breathless and tinged with relief.

"How long was I…"

"A few seconds. Three at the most. You … you went limp, and I stopped squeezing."

Chad peeled his cheek from Romeo's chest and looked up at him. "Are you … are you okay?"

“I’ve never heard you moan like that before,” Romeo whispered, stroking a finger along Chad’s nose. He touched Chad’s cheek, and lips, even traced the shell of his ear all while staring at him with such wonder. “You’ve never come like that either.”

Chad swiped his hand over the come dripping down Romeo’s chest. It had even reached the hollow of his throat. Chad wiped it away with his thumb. “Sorry—”

“Don’t you dare apologize.”

“I think I took chunks out of your shoulders.”

Romeo snorted. “You clenched so hard I thought you might take my cock from me, too.”

“Sorry—”

“No,” Romeo interrupted. “Don’t. That was intense. You coming round like that, it was like watching you come back to life and … how you clung to me.” He leaned back to look at Chad and cupped his jaw. “How you shivered and moaned against me.” He tipped Chad’s chin up to look at him, and checked his face for any sign of regret, but Chad just smiled, and thread his fingers through Romeo’s hair to the back of his head. “It was amazing, Chad. Reckless, dangerous, bordering on suicidal, but amazing.”

“I trust you.”

“I know you do, but you’re asking me to trust that part of myself with you and I don’t know for certain I can.” Romeo exhaled, “This … high we’re getting addicted to won’t be worth it if I hurt you.”

Chad thought better than saying he knew Romeo wouldn’t. He pushed their foreheads together instead.

“You scared me downstairs. I thought…”

“I know what you thought,” Chad whispered. “You stupid man.”

“I can’t lose you.”

“You’re not going to.”

“My Juliet.” Romeo kissed the nickname into Chad’s lips, and Chad whispered back, “*my* Romeo,” before kissing him back even harder.

Chapter Fifteen

Chad rubbed his throat as he watched Romeo from the kitchen window.

Romeo wore his oversized trench coat and black boots as he filled the free-standing birdfeeders. Merc sat at his side, big grey eyes on his master and not the impatient magpies hopping closer.

A blur of black passed the window. Chad leaned forward, trying to catch sight of the bird that had passed with Romeo's back turned, but it had disappeared in the direction of the outhouse.

Romeo turned, and his eyes met Chad's through the window. He smiled, but his smile fell when he noticed Chad obsessively stroked his neck.

'I'm fine', he mouthed as Romeo began making his way back to the house, Merc waddling at his side. The magpies attacked the birdfeeders like they were attempting to tear it apart. Romeo didn't look back at it.

His gaze stayed fixed to Chad until he moved out of sight.

Chad opened the back door for him.

"Does it hurt?" Romeo asked.

"No." Chad dropped his hand by his side, and stretched out his neck for Romeo to see. "Not even a bruise."

Romeo hummed, stroking Chad's skin. "I can fix that."

He leaned in to suck a mark onto Chad's neck.

Chad slapped him away lightly. "Sap. I saw it again."

"Saw what?"

"That big bird I keep telling you about."

Romeo rolled his eyes. "Sure you did."

"It flew behind you when you were filling the feeders."

"How convenient. Eight letters. The excrement of a male cow…"

"That clue was lazy, and I'm not bullshitting you. It was there." Chad wrapped his arms around Romeo's neck.

His phone buzzed itself along the kitchen table and broke the moment. Chad sighed, backing away. He snatched it up and tapped his thumb on the email notification.

"Lynn's sent me the list of Vincent's visitors. Finally."

"Finally?"

“She was reluctant. I don’t know why.”

His heart skipped a beat at Tate’s name. He’d visited Vincent once a week for a year at the same time on the same day. Saturday. 2:00.

“What is it?” Romeo asked.

“Nothing,” Chad shook his head. He scrolled down, picking out Eileen Hastings’ name, but not her daughter Lucy. Lucy had never visited him at Wiltknot before, but James had on and off over the years, along with a two other names, Sara Drinkwater and Adam Bell.

“There’s a few names we’ll need to research.”

He kept scrolling, until he got to a name that sped up his heart.

“Chad?”

“Alexandra Coulson.” Chad said, showing his phone to Romeo. “Ally has visited him before.”

“December 11th.” Romeo whispered. “Was it just the one visit?”

Chad frowned, brushing his finger over the screen. He scrolled back onto the previous year, passed Tate’s first visit, and stopped again at Alexandra Coulson.

“December 11th.” Romeo repeated. Chad swiped faster, going through the year before until he found her visit again.

The same day.

The same time.

December 11th. 1:00 PM.

Chad tapped off the screen, about to call her, but stopped himself. He placed the phone back down on the table and stared at it.

“Chad?” Romeo pressed.

“Ally knows this place. She knows Bardhum. She used to go to Clarksons supermarket, she told me Jeffery Adams’ art shop has been here forever.” Chad wetted his drying lips. “She never talks about her childhood, it’s a complete no-go area, and she didn’t want me to visit Vincent in Wiltknot— she didn’t want me looking into the murders at all…”

He turned to Romeo. Romeo studied him with his head tilted.

“What if…” Chad whispered.

“If?”

“The DI was reluctant to hand over Vincent’s files. He said there was some he couldn’t give me. Ally said she couldn’t be around me, until after

this thing with Vincent was over. Every year. The same date."

"The date he got caught—"

"The date his victim escaped."

Romeo rubbed his chin. "She would've been the right age and she is very protective of you," he continued softly. "Almost as if she sees herself in you, a kindred spirit who carries a similar burden."

"I think… I think I need a drink."

"We don't know anything for certain."

Chad bit his lip. "I get it now. I get it."

"Get what?"

"The look in her eyes. She sees herself in me. A survivor. Why didn't she tell me?"

"If you'd had the choice, would you have told her about everything you've been through?"

"Probably not. Christ, Romeo…"

His phone chirped, and for a moment he thought it was Ally calling him, but it was only one of the camera sensors being triggered.

Chad slumped. "Better not be your magpies again."

Romeo shrugged as Chad swiped his thumb onto the feed.

"Oh…"

"What is it?" Romeo asked.

"It's Lucy," Chad said slowly, frowning down at the truck trundling up the dirt road.

"What the hell does she want?"

"No idea."

Chad stood up, pocketed his phone and went to meet her outside. Chad pressed his flat hand above his eyes to help with the early morning sun, squinting as Lucy got closer to the house.

The truck wheels squealed as she came to a stop.

Chad strolled around to the driver's side, "Hey—"

"Don't hey me," Lucy snapped. She slammed the door of the truck and rushed at Chad. For a second, he stiffened, thinking she was about to hit him, but she stopped, and wagged a finger at him instead. Her hair was wild, and her eyes were ablaze. "I just had an interesting phone call with Candice. She said you were asking questions about me, and Harriet and Gavin. Why are you stirring up the past, Chad?"

“I’m not stirring.”

“You drove halfway across the country to speak to my oldest friend. Why?”

“I had my reasons.”

“Candice said you were particularly interested in my relationship with Harriet, my broken heart over Gavin choosing her, not me, then leaving altogether to live with his dad.”

Chad raised his hands in a placating gesture. “I just wanted a little background information.”

Lucy pushed his hands down. “I know exactly what you were doing. You wanted to find some kind of motive for me hurting Harriet. James did the same all those years ago, but he found nothing, and you didn’t either—”

“You lied about where you were the night she went missing.”

Lucy’s breath caught. A flare of panic widened her eyes, but she pushed it down. “I didn’t—”

“Candice let it slip. You took your parents’ truck and drove to her house. You spent the night.”

“So what?”

“Why wasn’t that mentioned in your original statement.”

“I knew James would look for a way of passing the blame for her disappearance to me. I asked Candice to lie. We thought James was responsible. We thought he’d done something to Harriet and the police had covered it up, and we continued to think that until Vincent admitted the truth.”

“The truth.” Chad tilted his head. “The truth? You told your dad Harriet was going to a friend’s house when you’d seen her getting in the car with James.”

“I told you why. I didn’t want to add to my dad’s stress.”

“And then you drove past Harriet on the way to Candice’s.”

“No.” Lucy shook her head. “I didn’t.”

“You drove down the road Harriet was walking up, and you didn’t see her?”

Lucy averted her gaze. “Vincent must’ve already taken her by then. I didn’t see her. Do you really think I would’ve left her walking home in the dark if I *had* seen her?”

“You and Harriet weren’t getting along at the time—”

“She was my sister! Why are you picking open old wounds?”

“Because I want to know the truth, and what I’ve discovered is that you lied about your whereabouts the night your sister went missing.”

“So what? It doesn’t change anything. Vincent still took her. He still killed her. He admitted it.”

It was Chad’s turn to look away.

“Wait…” she whispered. “You can’t possibly think…”

“What?”

“He confessed to it, Chad. Vincent Whitehall murdered my sister.”

“I’m open to all lines of enquiry.”

“Why?”

“I’m a detective. It’s in my nature. It’s in my blood.”

“This isn’t a homicide case,” Lucy took a step nearer. “This is a recovery.” Her breathing came in pants. “We’re after my sister’s remains, not her killer. We’ve already got her killer. He’s in Wiltknot, he’s been in Wiltknot for over thirty years, but you don’t think it was him, do you?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“Do you seriously think I’m capable of murdering my own sister?”

“When pushed to it, anyone—”

“Anyone can be a serial killer,” Lucy interrupted.

Chad shook his head. “That’s not what I was going to say.”

“Vincent Whitehall famously said that, didn’t he? Anyone? You. Me. Tate—”

“Don’t bring up Tate.”

Lucy’s eyes dropped to slits. “Why? Have I touched a nerve? This whole time I thought you were on my side, working to help find my sister, but you’ve been investigating me. You’ve found yourself a motive, even placed me at the scene of the crime. You bastard.”

“I—”

Her hand shot up so fast Chad didn’t have time to blink before it struck his cheek. He winced at the slap, tasting blood. His teeth cut into his flesh, and he grunted.

“You’re investigating me, and not the man that last saw her? That had Harriet in his car? That was obsessed with her, picking her up from school and showering her with expensive gifts while his wife wept for their dead daughter alone.” She let go of a bitter laugh, wrapping her arms around

herself. “It doesn’t surprise me. You’re all the same. The police look out for their own first. They protect them and turn a blind eye when it suits them.”

“I’m not turning a blind eye to James. He told me about Harriet.”

Lucy snorted. “His version of it, not Harriet’s. You’ve got Harriet’s version on a statement, but still you discredit it because she was a seventeen-year-old girl and James was a police officer going through a hard time who needed a shoulder to cry on. Poor him.”

“I needed his side of it.”

“Harriet’s wasn’t enough.”

“You keep saying gifts. What gifts did he get her?”

“Flowers and chocolates—”

“Things that are no longer here. That can’t be proved.”

Lucy leaned closer. “That pearl drop fucking necklace.”

Chad widened his eyes. “What?”

“Yeah,” Lucy sneered. “The one she was wearing when she disappeared. That was from him. She didn’t like James, he creeped her out, but she liked that, she liked how expensive it looked, how grown up it made her feel and she’d wear it to school to the awe of everyone else.”

Chad pressed his lips together.

“He was clever about the gifts, never handed them over directly, just left them in places she’d find with a nameless note. Roses. Heart shaped chocolates. And a pearl drop necklace. What did he tell you happened the night she went missing? And don’t say he was cautioning her for possession, we both know that wasn’t true.”

“He said he was ending things before it got serious between them.”

“Let me guess, he was letting her down gently, putting an end to her schoolgirl crush on him? Ever the gentleman.”

Chad didn’t answer.

“And you believed him?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what to believe.”

“He’s a liar, Chad.”

“But so are you.”

Lucy recoiled as if he’d hit her. She reached back for the open door of her truck. “I didn’t kill my sister. I didn’t see her on the road that afternoon. I thought I could trust you, but you’re like him, like James, like all of them, protecting each other.”

She jumped back into the truck and slammed the door shut. The engine choked and spluttered before rumbling as she turned it around. Chad watched the truck race back up the dirt track, cheek still stinging and with the taste of blood on his tongue.

"Shit," he hissed, before turning back to the house.

Romeo waiting for him with his arms folded in the hall, breathing heavily through his nose. He didn't look at Chad, but watched the horizon where Lucy's truck had faded to a red dot.

"She hit you."

It came out as a rumble. Chad ignored him, and rolled his fingers into his cheek while squeezing past Romeo to get to the kitchen.

"She fucking *hit* you."

"Just a slap."

"Do you know how hard that was?" Romeo asked, pursuing Chad through to the sink, and breathing down his neck. Chad spun the taps on and leaned down to fill his mouth with water. He spat it out, bloodied, into the sink before asking, "What was hard?"

"Watching her hit you through the spyhole in the door, and not rushing out there to strangle her. I almost did."

Chad turned to face him. "You can't do that, Romeo. You can't. You can't be seen."

"I want to kill her." Romeo growled, gripping Chad's face.

"She was angry at me." Chad looked away. "I deserved it."

"No, you didn't." Romeo lifted Chad's chin. His grip bordered painful. "Being angry doesn't give her the right to hit you."

"It's fine—"

"It's not fine," Romeo snapped. He swept his thumb across the heated skin. "She's very lucky not to be dead right now. I'm tempted to take your car and ram her off the road."

"Don't do that," Chad said, grabbing Romeo's wrist. "Look, she knows I went to see Candice. She knows I was asking questions, looking for a motive, and opportunity."

"You found both and she's lashed out. Doesn't that tell you what you need to know?"

"No," Chad sagged against the sink, "it doesn't, and this," he poked his tongue into his cheek, "it's just an occupational hazard."

“It’s happened before?”

Chad shrugged. “Usually Josh is there to intercept.”

Romeo bristled. His thumb on Chad’s cheek pressed harder as he stroked.

“She might not be guilty of her sister’s murder, but she is guilty of hitting you, and that’s enough to put her in our field.”

Chad pressed his hand over Romeo’s one cupping his face. He brushed his thumb back and forth over Romeo’s hand until the painful grip softened. Romeo eased out a breath, dropping his shoulders. The tension coiling around Romeo lost its hold bit by bit.

He stroked Chad’s face as his breathing slowed.

“You told me Lucy was on edge, but you didn’t tell me she was that volatile.”

“Her and James both,” Chad said. “Something tells me we’re not going to be on each other’s Christmas lists after this.”

“No, but Lucy has put herself on *my* list.”

Chad rolled his eyes. “Is she before or after Dean?”

Romeo looked up to the ceiling as if he was considering. “After Dean, but before Arnold Fritz.”

Chapter Sixteen

"Hey!"

Josh held an extra-large pizza box in his hands. A carrier bag hung off his arm, swinging a bottle of what looked like cola. The porch light shone on his face, reflecting off the outline of his blond hair. It almost looked like a halo around him, faintly glowing as he beamed at Chad.

"Yeah, I know, turning up unannounced is a bit of a dick move, but I've missed your face."

The cameras had alerted Chad to Josh's impromptu visit, and he'd had just enough time to usher a grumbling Romeo upstairs.

Josh looked over Chad's shoulder. His eyes widened. "Or is this a bad time?"

Chad tried to resist the urge to turn to look for the source, but in the end, he had to. Romeo's grim-reaper coat hung off the banister.

"Oh. Frank's here—"

"Great," Josh smiled. "I got extra-large."

"But he's sleeping."

"Wake the fucker up."

Chad cringed. "Not a good idea. He's grumpy as hell if he doesn't get his sleep. He works all kinds of crazy hours and has to travel a lot."

"What does he do again?"

"Do?"

"Other than you," Josh winked, then shook his head. "No, seriously, what's his job?"

"He's in the hotel management trade." Chad waved a dismissive hand. "It's not that interesting."

"Ooo, sounds fancy to me."

"But he just got back last night … he's proper jetlagged."

"Ouch." Josh dropped his voice. "We'll be as quiet as we can then."

"That's probably for the best."

"Pizza!" Josh announced, lifting the box. "It's pepperoni, extra-large, cheese stuffed crust."

Chad's mouth filled with saliva. "Sounds great."

He stepped aside, allowing Josh inside, who immediately turned to deposit all his goods onto Chad before dropping to his knees in front of

Merc. Chad took the cola, pizza, and then juggled to hold the rucksack Josh had swung off his shoulder.

"What's this?" Chad asked, hiking it up.

"Later." Josh replied. He smiled, but it was small, almost shy, then he resumed fussing over Merc.

Chad had expected Josh to get on the floor and allow Merc into his lap, but he hadn't thought Josh would go one step further and roll around on the floor with Merc while growling softly and rubbing his slobbery cheeks.

Merc's tale whipped back and forth so fast it blurred, and he yipped at Josh, before climbing onto Josh's chest and slobbering all over his face. Josh scrunched up his face, laughing as the two play wrestled.

"You need to get yourself a dog," Chad told him. "There were plenty at the rehoming center."

Josh got back to his feet and dusted his knees. A patch of dog drool shone on his chin, and he grimaced as he wiped a hand through it. "Might make a good hair gel."

"You're disgusting," Chad said, pointing Josh in the direction of the kitchen.

Josh went through with a big smile on his face. He washed his hands while whistling a happy tune. Chad studied him from the doorway, squinting at his overly happy demeanor.

"Oh, god."

"What?" Josh asked while drying his hands.

"You and Angel didn't just … you know…"

"No," Josh blushed. "That was one time."

"You were overly happy for the rest of the shift. Ally thought you'd taken something on your lunch break."

"I'd not taken anything, but I'd given it."

"Okay," Chad rolled his eyes. "I'll be in the living room."

Josh jogged across the kitchen to catch up before taking the pizza from Chad's hands.

"What's with the rucksack?" Chad asked, swinging it off his shoulder.

"Later," Josh said again before Chad could open it. "What's with your face?"

"My face?"

“Yeah, I thought you were blushing because I’m hot and you can’t help but get turned on, but now only one of your cheeks is red. Kinda looks like someone hit you.”

“Later.” Chad sighed.

“Did some one hit you?”

“Pizza first.”

Josh used his shoulder to push into the living room. He collapsed down on one of the sofas before patting the space beside him. Merc launched himself up, still swinging his tail so fast he almost fell off from the momentum. He pressed close to Josh and lay down, eyes darting between Josh and the pizza box.

Josh flipped the lid. Chad placed the bottle of cola on the table before balling the plastic bag in his fist. He sighed as he threw it onto the opposite sofa.

“Is … Ally back at work?”

“No. Faye thinks she’s about to retire.”

“Retire?”

Josh shrugged. “She was retired, but started again around the time you moved up here. Strange that…”

“Why’s it strange?”

Josh grabbed a slice of pizza. “You know, I think she sees you as her unofficial son.”

Chad raised his eyebrow. “What does that make you?”

“Her unofficial grandson that she’s not keen on.”

Chad snorted, sat down beside Josh and grabbed a piece of pizza from the box.

“You should call her, though.”

Chad hesitated before taking a bite of pizza. “I’m building up to it.”

“Good, but try to make it this century, she’s quite old…”

“If she was here—”

“I know, pizza in the face.”

Chad nodded. “And you’d deserve it.”

“It’s been shit at work without you. I even found myself doing a crossword to fill the hole you left.”

“Yeah?”

Josh snorted. “Biting insect, four letters.”

Chad lifted his chin at the challenge. “Gnat.”

“Yeah, I know that now. Gnat with a silent G. What’s the point in silent letters? I mean they exist, for the sole purpose of being overlooked, so me overlooking them is exactly what I’m supposed to be doing, doesn’t make me an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot, Josh.”

“Try telling Faye that. She looked at me like I’m a kid.”

“I think you are the same age as one of hers.”

“The DI is distracted and snappy, and Dead-Dave creeps me out. I need you back.”

Chad smiled. “I don’t think it’ll be much longer.”

“Good.”

Chad put the TV on for background noise while they ate. Josh kept stealing glances at him.

“What?” Chad asked.

“*Did* someone hit you?”

Chad sighed, and gave his pizza crust to Merc. “Yeah. Lucy.”

“Lucy? Lucy Hastings? What the hell?”

“She was angry I’d been investigating her sister’s disappearance. She got upset when she found out I’d been looking at her as a potential suspect.”

“Jesus, Chad!” Josh dropped his slice. “You accused her of killing her own sister?”

“I didn’t accuse her. I just asked her old friend a few questions.”

“Do you really think Lucy did it?”

“I don’t know, but statistically, you’re more likely to be murdered by a family member or somebody you know compared to a stranger.”

“Yeah,” Josh nodded, “But that statistic drops dramatically when you’re in the territory of an active serial killer.”

“I know—”

“And you fit the killer’s profile.”

“She lied.” Chad took a deep breath. “She lied about where she was the night Harriet went missing. She wasn’t at home like she said.”

Josh bit his lip. “Okay, that sounds a bit more promising.”

“Harriet had just broken up with Gavin Hargreaves, Lucy’s teenage crush, and he moved away.”

“Motive. Good. But…”

“She had an alibi that night. She was with her friend Candice, unless the two of them were in on it together or Lucy did it alone and managed to destroy and conceal a body in thirty minutes, I don’t know, Josh…”

“What does your gut say?”

“She didn’t do it.”

Josh shifted forward on the sofa to reach for the bottle of cola. “Any other suspects?”

“James.”

“Ah, James.”

“He told me about his relationship with Harriet, or his PG, watered down version of it at least where he let the infatuated schoolgirl down gently and she fled in tears.”

“Your gut says?”

“He’s lying about their relationship.” Josh poured Chad a drink and handed it to him. “Thanks.”

“But do you think he killed her?”

“He was arrested soon after her disappearance, and they didn’t keep him in custody for the full forty-eight hours. They let him go without charge.”

Josh clicked his tongue to the roof of his mouth. “I see. Anyone else?”

“It’s hard to find any new evidence for a case over thirty years ago when you’re keeping your personal investigation a secret.” He sighed. “It’s not like I can make a public appeal for more information—could you imagine the fall out?”

“Maybe it was Vincent after all.”

“Maybe.”

Josh pushed back into the sofa again, sloshing cola from his cup into the pizza box. “And how is it chaperoning the one-hundred-year-old devil incarnate?”

“Not fun. The sooner he dies, the better.”

“I’ll toast to that,” Josh lifted his paper cup, and Chad did the same. They both downed them.

Chad rubbed his throat before fixating on the rucksack again. “So…”

“No,” Josh said. “All the pizza needs to be eaten before we start on *that*.”

“Is it a new games console?”

“No, and no more clues.”

Chad frowned but gave in after Josh glared at him. The pizza didn’t last long, not with them both ravenous and Merc ready to gobble up any unwanted crusts. Josh held his fingers out for Merc to lick clean, much to Chad’s disgust.

“What?” Josh asked. “Why you looking at me like that?”

“It’s kind of gross.”

“Hey, at the shopping center there’s tanks of fish that eat bits of your feet. This is practically the same thing.”

“If this is your business idea after you leave the police force, good luck to you.”

Josh wrinkled his nose. “You’ll be right there beside me.”

“The rucksack.” Chad asked.

“Okay, okay,” Josh replied. “Just let me wash my hands first.”

He left the room to wash them in the kitchen. Chad checked his phone and opened a message from Romeo.

I can smell the grease from here.

Chad grinned, messaging back.

Smells good, doesn’t it? :)

“Right,” Josh said, strolling across the room.

Chad pocketed his phone and looked up at Josh who hovered awkwardly. Josh bit his lip, reaching down for the rucksack. He heaved it onto the table and tugged at the zip.

“Where to start…” he murmured.

“The beginning would be good,” Chad suggested. “What’s going on?”

“Yeah, the beginning,” Josh let go of a strained laugh. He stopped opening the rucksack, and waited. Chad didn’t know what he was waiting for. He flicked Josh in the ribs.

“Why have you gotten so nervous?” Chad asked. “It’s me.”

Josh swung around to look at him. “I’m not nervous.”

His cheeks had pinked, he avoided eye contact, and he mauled his bottom lip.

“I’ve literally seen you handcuffed to a bed,” Chad reminded him. “You looked more at ease then than you do now.”

“That wasn’t a big deal.”

“Yes it was,” Chad mumbled. “I thought you were dead. Remember.”

“You were the one that just made a joke about it. This,” Josh rested his hand on the rucksack. “This is a big deal.”

Chad groaned and grabbed the closest magpie cushion to sink his nails into. “Come on, Josh, you’re killing me here.”

“So as you know, I had my annual review with the DI a month ago and it went well. Other than the club incident, and then him walking in on me being handcuffed to a bed, he was pleased with my performance. He said I’ve got potential to go far.”

Chad smiled. “I agree.”

“But he also said I should start thinking about my future. I need to put myself out there, I need to take on more responsibility and look for ways of proving myself to him and the chief.”

“O…kay.”

Josh took a deep breath. “Last month, a woman came into the station. Charlotte Sinclair. I overheard her asking for help looking for her missing grandad, but she was palmed off by the guy on reception so I strode over and offered my services.”

Chad snorted softly. “You fancied her you mean.”

“Yes, but that’s beside the point. Her dad went missing, just—completely vanished. He was due round her house for Sunday lunch, but never showed up. His car is still parked outside the house, and when she went inside, the TV was still on, and there was a cold cup of tea on the living room table. His phone was there, his wallet, even his hearing aid.”

Chad scooted forward on the sofa, listening intently.

“Weird, right?”

“Weird,” Chad agreed. “Hundreds of thousands of people go missing each year.”

“More like 170,000 to be a little more specific, and around 90,000 of them are adults. They get less press time, less police resources.”

“Someone has been doing his research.”

Josh shot him a pleased smile, then yanked the rucksack wide open. He searched through the files inside before pulling out one and opening it up while directing another pleased smile in Chad’s direction.

“This is him,” Josh said, sliding out a picture, “Graham Brennan.”

Chapter Seventeen

Ice swept through Chad.

It accumulated in his chest, stalling his lungs before shattering. His breath hitched, and he clutched the t-shirt he wore in front of his heart, twisting the fabric as his fingers shook.

"Chad?" Josh flapped a piece of paper at him. His happy smile dimmed slightly as Chad forced himself to breathe normally. Chad swallowed a few times, but a cold lump had formed in his throat, and he couldn't get air or saliva past it. He choked.

"Shit, the pizza isn't repeating on you, is it?"

"No," Chad said, reaching for the sheet of paper without looking. He knocked it from Josh's fingers. It fluttered to the floor, landing by Chad's feet, and there he was, Graham Brennan, except he didn't look as ill as when Chad and Romeo had seen him. He sat in an armchair with a walking stick across his lap.

A woman with red hair crouched beside him, hand over one of his as they beamed at the camera.

Chad's fingers twitched. He hovered his hand above the print off, before snatching it back and grabbing his throat. "Actually," he croaked, "I'm just gonna get some water."

Josh stooped down to grab the sheet instead. "Okay."

Chad swayed as he got up from the sofa, but Josh didn't notice, neatly slipping the piece of paper back into the folder. One folder of *many*. Chad stumbled from the room and into the kitchen, crashing into the sink. He gripped the edge of it, breathing hard before spinning on the taps.

He didn't drink anything. He was pretty sure the lump of sharp ice in his throat would've stopped him, but he did run his hand under the tap before sweeping it through his hair. The harsh shock to his scalp stopped the room from spinning.

Chad straightened, taking a deep breath. He inhaled on one, and exhaled on five until he could breathe evenly again.

"You good?" Josh asked when he stepped back into the living room a few minutes later.

Chad nodded and sat back down on the sofa. Josh waited until he'd settled before reopening the folder and handing over the printout of

Graham. If Josh noticed Chad's fingers trembling, he didn't comment.

"That's Graham, and the woman kneeling beside him is Charlotte."

"Pretty girl."

"I know, right?" Josh snorted. "Her eyes are emerald-green—no—don't distract me, I've got to focus. Where was I?"

"Graham has disappeared without a trace," Chad said.

"Yes," Josh pointed at the folder he held in Chad's direction. "Vanished. So, I asked the neighbors, and one of them tells me someone was snooping around the area before he died. He saw this mystery person leave Graham's property through the back door, but when he asked Graham about it, he hadn't even known someone had been in his house. He'd been out at the time."

"Strange," Chad murmured. "Did he report this mystery man?"

"No," he shrugged. "I guess Graham hadn't seen him for himself, and according to Charlotte he didn't always see eye to eye with his neighbor, but whatever. It's strange, and a few days later, Graham vanishes."

"No family he could've gone to?"

"Nope. He never remarried after his first wife. His daughter, Amelia, moved to Canada, and his only close relative is Charlotte, his granddaughter. She hasn't heard from him. I started looking at other disappearances." Josh set Graham's folder on the table. "And I found a pattern. Mystery guy lurking, breaking and entering, not taking anything. Dressed all in black, face covered, then … a few days later, a person vanishes."

"Who has vanished?" Chad asked.

Josh pulled out three more folders. He held up one. "Julius Tipper," He slapped it down on the table, and held up the next, "Ellie Burner." It joined the other folders on the table.

Chad hid his hands beneath a cushion. "Three."

Josh hummed, "We'll get to that." He smiled. "They're all missing people, so I started to look for CCTV. I've been going through it every spare second I get, given up video games and everything and I found something."

He turned his back on Chad and arranged the folders on the table. He pulled a page from each one, sorted them in a stack, then handed them over.

By some miracle, Chad didn't drop them.

He looked through them all, keeping his expression neutral. They were printed out CCTV images of a car. A black Ford Focus with a dent in one side. It was old, twenty years old, and had been sent to the scrap heap to be destroyed.

Chad closed his eyes in a long blink.

It was his car, the one hidden in the outhouse. The one he had bought soon after they'd moved into the house for Romeo to use. The same one Chad used when he drove off in the night to collect their victims.

Josh had found it.

"This car." Josh said, glee shone in his eyes. "It's around every location the night they go missing. The windows have been blacked out, and I got Angel to run the plate and it's fake. It's a ghost car that doesn't belong to anyone."

Chad didn't trust himself to speak. He handed the pages back.

"But that's not the best part," Josh beamed. He delved his hand back into his rucksack. "You know that creepy building Dr Carter owned where he was chopping up bodies?"

"How can I forget," Chad deadpanned.

Josh retrieved yet another file. "This car was captured on a dash cam parked up outside that place the day before Dr Carter went missing. It's the same car."

He handed over a sheet of grainy stills from the dash cam footage. Chad nodded. "Looks like the same car. What's your theory? The car belongs to Dr Carter? He's been kidnapping and killing people?"

His heart thumped in his chest, but he didn't have time for subtly, if he could shift the blame onto Dr Carter, he would.

Josh scrunched up his nose. "At first, I thought it might be something like that, Dr Carter being responsible, but then I asked Angel for help finding the car."

"Is that how you two started … fooling around?"

"Yes, but *shhh*, I'm on a roll, don't distract me. I told her about the car, and the distinctive dent in the side, and she recognized it from a few years back."

"Recognized it?"

Josh nodded. "It was involved in a serious traffic collision and was used in the enquiry. The driver, Chloe Ellis, died. She was hit by a drunk

driver, spun off the road and collided into a tree. The car still worked, but her parents wanted it to be destroyed, and that's the last anyone heard of it, until Angel recognized the dent, the make, the model. She found out where it went to be scrapped, and me and her visited the site, put pressure on the owner until he told us he sold the car to someone for far more money than the vehicle was worth."

Chad fidgeted, Josh's eyes were so bright and excited it made them impossible to look at, so Chad ran his gaze back and forth over the folders instead.

"The owner said he doesn't remember much about the guy who bought it, said he paid in cash, wore a black beanie hat, and a black scarf that obscured half his face. Said he was shorter than me, slimmer, too," Josh sighed. "He thinks he had brown eyes, but can't be sure. Then I showed him a picture of Dr Carter, asked if it was him, and he was adamant he wasn't the guy I was looking for. This is someone *new*."

"You didn't tell me," Chad's voice came out strangled. He tried again. "You didn't tell me about this … about what you'd been doing. I could've … I could've helped."

"I know you would have, but I wanted to be sure I was on to something. I didn't want to mess up and be embarrassed, especially in front of you."

"Josh—"

"I want to impress you, that's all," he frowned, then laughed, "but not in a gay way. I want you to take me seriously. You are taking me seriously, right?"

So much hope shone in Josh's eyes, Chad couldn't bear to crush it.

"Yes," Chad nodded. "I'm taking this really seriously."

"Phew," Josh wiped the back of his hand across his brow.

"What … is your theory? What do you think this is?"

"Murder," Josh smiled. "I think this is murder."

"Murder?"

"Yeah. Dr Carter, Graham, Julius, Ellie. They've vanished. No one had seen them. They didn't pack anything up, they haven't withdrawn any money. They've gone, and I'll bet my life on this driver in the black car being involved. He's our killer."

"Our?"

“Yeah,” Josh leaned forward to punch Chad lightly on the shoulder. “You’re part of this now. You, me, and Angel, you’re my dream team. I need you to back me up when I take this to the DI.”

Chad lowered his head. “What’s the killer’s motive?”

“Haven’t worked that out yet, but whoever it is must be the same person spotted in the days preceding the disappearance. These aren’t spontaneous, they’re targeted. We’ve just got to work out what criteria these victims fit in to, but for now, Angel’s alerted the traffic cops to the dodgy plate. If our killer is driving around, they’ll find him sooner or later.”

“You and Angel are quite the team.”

Josh blushed. “Yeah, we get on pretty good. She’s been amazing.”

“She likes you.”

“Focus, Chad.” Josh snorted. “We’re talking serial killers, not our love lives. I’m going to present all this to the DI and the chief tomorrow, and then, fingers crossed, they’ll let me lead this investigation and not pass it on to someone else. So … what do you think?”

“What do I think?”

Josh ran his teeth over his bottom lip. “Did I do good?” He leaned forward, waiting.

Josh was the light to the dark. A big blond haired, blue eyed man whose warmth Chad needed to feel human.

As he waited for Chad’s verdict, his smile dimmed, his eyes lost their hero worship shine, and he clutched one hand over the other.

“This is,” Chad waved a hand at all the folders, all the damning evidence laid out in front of him. “It’s great, Josh. You’ve done amazing.”

“Really? Because you kinda look like you’re about to be sick.”

“That’s the pizza,” Chad said. He looked up at Josh. “This is… I’m proud of you, Josh.”

Josh tipped back on his feet as if the words had completely overwhelmed him. Then he smiled, the biggest, brightest smile Chad had ever seen, before launching at Chad on the sofa. Merc yipped and clambered off as Josh squeezed Chad in a hug.

“You have no idea how much that means to me.”

And Josh had no idea how much *he* meant to Chad, how much his last dregs of humanity relied on him, but as he hugged Josh back, he sunk his teeth into his sore cheek as reality caught up with him.

One day, Josh wouldn't smile at him like that anymore.

One day, he'd learn the truth.

Chad had always thought that day would be years into the future, decades if he was lucky, but he'd been wrong.

It was right on his doorstep.

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Chad managed to keep the swirling pizza in his stomach until Josh had left, then he sprinted upstairs with Merc on his heels. He ended up on his knees in front of the toilet, vomiting until his throat burned and his sides ached. Merc kept nudging Chad with his nose, but Chad was too preoccupied to reassure him.

"Mercutio," Romeo said.

Chad closed his eyes and listened to the click-clack of paws. Romeo stepped into the bathroom and shut Merc out. Merc whined and scratched the door, but one shout of 'no' from Romeo and he fell silent.

Romeo sighed and rubbed between Chad's shoulders. "That's what you get for eating greasy pizza."

"Romeo," Chad shook his head. He pressed his mouth against his shoulder when he thought he might be sick again.

Romeo crouched down beside him, and wrapped a warm hand around the back of Chad's neck. "Get it all out and you'll feel better."

"Josh knows." Chad croaked.

"Know what?"

"He knows what our car looks like. He knows where I got it from. He knows that it's involved in people disappearing."

Panic clawed at Chad's chest. He fisted his hand in his t-shirt again, panting until black dots danced in his vison. Romeo pulled Chad away from the toilet and sat him on his lap. He wrapped his arms around Chad's middle and rested his chin on Chad's shoulder.

"Breathe, Chad."

Chad pressed back into Romeo, shutting his eyes. Romeo breathed by his ear. Chad turned his head towards him, copying his breaths.

"Nothing Josh knows leads him to us," Romeo said quietly.

"It's only a matter of time. Once he goes to the DI with this, everyone will be involved. What if we weren't careful enough? What if someone saw my face? Or yours?"

“Josh hasn’t gone to your DI with what he knows?”

“Not yet.”

“Who knows about the car?”

Chad eased out a slow breath. “Him, and a dispatch controller called Angel.”

“Just them two…”

Chad stiffened at the wistful way Romeo spoke. As if he’d stumbled across the obvious answer. The panic Chad had managed to beat back flooded him once again, making his pulse pound in his ears. He struggled out of Romeo’s arms, then swiveled on his knees until he faced Romeo. The monster. It lurked in Romeo’s green eyes, ready to be let loose.

“No. *That* isn’t an option.”

“It is.” The muscle in Romeo’s jaw jumped as he clenched it, then he sighed. “But fine.”

Chad blinked back the sting in his eyes.

“We need to get rid of the car,” He nodded to himself, more in control now Romeo had backed down from wanting to kill Josh and Angel “That’s what we need to do.”

“I’ll drive it away and torch it.”

“Not yet,” Chad said. “It will be too suspicious. We need to wait a while. I knew, I knew someone would start linking these disappearances, but Josh … and he wants me to work with him and Angel and hunt this killer. What if it’s already too late?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if there’s a piece of evidence out there, waiting to be discovered. I thought I was careful, but it’s inevitable I would’ve been caught on CCTV. What if someone looked out their window and saw me on their neighbor’s doorstep. What if they can identify me? What if they saw me lead Graham, Ellie, or Julius into that car. Then it’s all over.”

“Stop,” Romeo gripped Chad’s shoulder.

“They’ll come here, they’ll search the house, find the car, dig up the field.”

“Chad,” Romeo growled. “You need to calm down.”

“We’ll be arrested. They’ll take you away from me. I won’t see you again.”

“Never. You hear me?” Romeo shook him. “No one will take me from you. I won’t let that happen,” he pressed his forehead to Chad’s. “It’s us, together, for as long as we’re given on this earth. I won’t be without you.”

Chad grabbed Romeo’s t-shirt in both hands. “But what if—”

“Then we go out together. You and me. Like we’ve always said.”

Chad nodded weakly against him. “Romeo and Juliet.”

“Exactly, and wherever we end up, we’ll end up there together, too.” Romeo leaned back. “Josh *will* find out the truth…”

Chad’s mouth hung open.

“A long, long time in the future,” Romeo finished. “He wants you to work on the case, right?”

Chad nodded.

“That’s puts you in the perfect position.”

“Position?”

“To sabotage it, to push Josh in a certain direction, to protect us.”

“Sabotage,” Chad whispered. “You mean be a dirty cop.”

The detective in him recoiled at such an idea.

Romeo laughed. He stroked his thumb against the top of Chad’s spine. “I think you’re long past that.”

“Yeah, I know.” Chad squeezed his eyes shut. There were literal bodies in the field. “But I’ve never sabotaged a case, never,” he shrugged, “I’ve never tampered with evidence or deliberately misled officers.”

“I seem to remember you planting evidence, a pair of sunglasses if I remember correctly, to make sure Dr Carter was well and truly implicated.”

“Dr Carter was guilty.”

Romeo shrugged. “I know.”

“And this is Josh.” Chad said, pushing Romeo’s hand off his neck. “We’re friends. I don’t want to lie to him.”

“You lie to him every day.”

“It’s different.”

Romeo hummed. “He’s important to you?”

“Yes.”

“More important than me?”

Chad twisted to Romeo. He widened his eyes, shaking his head.

“I need to hear you say it.” Romeo said.

“No one is more important than you, Romeo.”

Romeo nodded. “Then will you lie for me, Chad? Will you lie to Josh? Will you lead him astray?”

“Yes. For you. Yes.”

Chapter Eighteen

Chad startled at the alert on his phone.

He snatched it off the arm of the sofa, heart in his throat, then slumped at yet another magpie hopping across the mud in front of one of the cameras. If he didn't know any better, he would've thought they were doing it on purpose to torment him.

Romeo had told him once that a group of magpies were sometimes called a mischief. They were certainly living up to their name, cackling wildly in the distance every time they gave Chad a mini heart attack.

"Give it here," Romeo said, holding his hand out for the phone.

They were on the sofa having just had dinner. Romeo lounged with his feet on the coffee table, but Chad had been unable to relax. Instead, he sat ramrod straight, on the edge, ready to move. He'd been like that all day, jumping at shadows, and gasping every time his phone made a noise.

"Why?" Chad asked. He curled his fingers protectively around the device.

Romeo sighed, making a show of holding out his hand again.

Chad put his phone into Romeo's palm, and watched as he spun it, then tapped away on the app, silencing the camera alerts. His phone would still light up every time a sensor got triggered, but would no longer buzz and vibrate.

"But what if—"

"You need to relax," Romeo said, looking him over. "You didn't sleep last night."

"How could I after Josh—"

"And all day you've been jumping out of your skin every time your phone goes off. Your heart is racing."

"You don't know that—"

"Your whole body jolts every time it beats. I can see it, Chad. You're sweating, your eyes are darting, you fidget … even Merc is on edge because of you."

Chad looked at Merc in his bed, Peter Rabbit between his paws, and his big eyes on Chad. He whined shrilly and lowered his head.

"Relax," Romeo said slowly.

Chad opened his mouth to argue before slumping. "I'll try."

“Good.”

He’d just started to relax, eyes half closing as the sleep he’d been denying himself fought back, but the news reporter’s voice, no longer a low grumble, pitched with excitement.

“We’re receiving reports from Wiltknot,” he said, flicking his eyes back and forth along the teleprompter. “Vincent Whitehall has been rushed to St. John’s hospital. He’s said to be in critical condition. This is a major blow in the hopes of finding Harriet Hastings’ remains.”

“I’ve got to go,” Chad mumbled, heaving himself up.

Romeo raised an eyebrow. “Why? What are you planning on doing? Speeding his death along.”

“I’m going to make sure he doesn’t escape.”

“Do you really think that’s likely?”

“You escaped from a hospital.” Chad frowned. “I wouldn’t put it past Vincent to have planned this all just so he can make a break for it.”

“Then you’d better get over there.” Romeo turned back to the TV. “You can try to coax him into the car and bring him here. We can make those fantasies you didn’t want to tell me a reality.”

Chad rolled his eyes as he left the room.

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A cordon had been set up a healthy distance from the front doors to the hospital. Chad blinked each time a camera flash singed his eyeballs and blocked out the roar of questions from the press. They stirred with excitement when they spotted him jogging from the car park. He kept his head low, his eyes tracking the ground as he stepped inside. Lynn met him in reception, and took him by the elbow, steering him away from the conjugated outpatients.

“He’s this way,” she said, hurrying Chad along the corridor. “He’s in a quieter part of the hospital. Staff didn’t want his presence to upset the other patients. We would’ve preferred Vincent’s condition and location be kept a secret, but you know firsthand what the press are like.”

“Are there police officers present?” Chad asked.

“One at Vincent’s door.”

Chad’s eyebrows shot up. “One? One officer? Is that all?”

“There’s only one way in and out of Vincent’s room—”

“But what if he overpowers the officer?”

Lynn's brutal pace slowed. Her brow pinched as she looked at him. "Vincent's not going to be staging any last minute escape attempts, Chad. He has multiple organ failure. This … this is *it*."

They rounded a corner, and Chad came to a stop. He whipped his gaze around the scene. Lucy Hastings sat on a chair, clutching her handbag. She dug her nails into the leather, staring at the door opposite her. Her hair looked matted, and the purple hue beneath her eyes suggested she'd not been sleeping.

James Poole paced back and forth in front of a row of four chairs, muttering to himself as he stroked a hand through his hair. His tie was askew, his shirt was untucked—he appeared just as sleep deprived as Lucy. James paused briefly to glance at Chad before resuming his rambling march.

Lastly, Chad looked at the police officer slouched against the wall, yawning into the back of his hand. He straightened when he noticed Chad staring at him, and gave him a friendly nod that Chad didn't return. He was young, too young to have the responsibly of making sure Vincent Whitehall stayed in his room. There was not one wrinkle on his face and his stubble looked like soft brown fuzz on his cheeks.

"Any news?" Chad asked, not aiming his question at anyone.

Lucy twisted her body away from him and turned her head in a clear 'fuck you' gesture. The officer shrugged, and leaned to look through the window in the door.

"The doctor is in there now." Lynn said. "You might want to take a seat."

Chad eyed up his options. A seat beside Lucy who scratched her nails audibly against her handbag when he looked at her, or a seat where James paced, working a groove into the floor. Just watching him made Chad nauseated.

Chad shot Lynn a small smile. "I'm fine here."

"If you're sure."

Lynn stepped away and sat down beside Lucy. She ran a comforting hand up her back until Lucy turned towards her. Chad backed up to the wall, eyeing the door. The officer guarding it kept straight, and tried to fight off a yawn, but it distorted his face and his eyes watered.

They waited until the doctor stepped out of Vincent's room with a grim look on his face. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his white scrubs and opened his mouth to speak, but James rushed him, blurting out questions.

"Is he still alive? Has he said anything? Has he—"

"He's very weak," the doctor raised his hand to stop James's jumping in again, "but he's requested to speak to you."

"Who?" James demanded.

The doctor glanced at each of them. "All of you."

James made to go past the doctor, but he was stopped by a firm hand on his chest. "One at a time. Starting with you, James—"

"Then what are you waiting for?" James snapped, pushing his way into the room.

The door shut behind him. Chad moved further up the corridor and took a seat.

Lucy bounced her leg on the floor until Lynn took hold of her hand and squeezed. Chad lowered his gaze to his hands in his lap, fiddling with his fingers during the wait.

Ten minutes after James had gone into Vincent's room, the door opened, and he stepped out, red faced and shaking his head.

"What did he say?" Chad asked.

Lucy sniffled, and lifted her head from the crook of Lynn's neck.

"Nothing of any use," James snapped, before stalking off.

Chad shared the briefest of glances with Lucy, then she stood up, still clutching her handbag and stepped up to the door. The officer standing guard opened it for her as she hovered on the threshold before stepping inside.

Lynn sighed. Chad resumed staring at his hands until approaching footsteps grew too loud to be blocked out. He lifted his head, only to gape at Ally standing in the corridor. Her mouth was set in a hard line and her eyes lacked their usual warmth. She unbuttoned her purple coat while directing a question at Lynn.

"Am I too late?"

"No," Lynn said. "He's still alive and he's still coherent enough to speak. He's asking for visitors one at a time."

“Of course he is.” Ally replied. “He does like to drag things out and increase the suffering as much as possible. It’s a pity he gets what he wants right to the end.”

Chad bristled at the barb aimed his way.

“You’re here, too.” Chad said softly.

“Not at Vincent’s request.” Ally smiled cruelly at the door. “He doesn’t want to see me, but I’m not going to give him a choice. My ugly mug will be the last one he sees if I have my way.”

The door opened and Lucy inched into the corridor with her bottom lip trembling. The tops of her nails bled from where she’d been gripping her bag. Lynn shot to her feet, and wrapped an arm around her back, but Lucy didn’t acknowledge her help as they disappeared down the corridor.

“She looks ready to break.” Ally remarked. She looked over to Chad. “Isn’t it your turn?”

He nodded, getting to his feet. “Ally…”

She waved him off. “Later.”

Chad pushed the door open and stepped into the room.

Vincent Whitehall lay on the bed on his side, gaunt faced, and wheezing. A thin sheet covered him, but his arm was out, curling up towards his chin. He held a bloodied tissue in his hand. Chad sat down on the chair beside the bed and was hit by a sudden sense of déjà vu.

Vincent’s state reminded him of his own mother on her death bed. He remembered looking down on her and feeling nothing. He remembered the nurses who’d been treating her standing either side of him, rubbing his arms, telling him how sorry they were. Then Chad remembered their faces, their confusion twisting into disgust at his lack of emotion to his mother’s death.

He didn’t cry.

He didn’t lean on them for support.

He backed away from them and left the room.

“What are you thinking about?”

Vincent’s words left his lips in a painful sounding whisper. His eyes had opened a crack. They were black and sunken, but they found Chad.

“I was thinking about my mother,” Chad whispered.

“She died in the hospital.”

He nodded.

“Do you miss her?”

Chad shook his head. “No.”

“Did you love her?”

“She was my mother.”

Vincent snorted softly. “That’s not an answer, and yet, somehow it answers my question perfectly. You shouldn’t fear judgement from anyone, Chad, least of all me. If it’s okay to love someone you shouldn’t, then it must be okay not to love someone you should.”

“What has this all been about, Vincent?”

“You know what this was about.”

“You want the public to see me fail—”

Vincent laughed, but it turned into gasps, and weak, wet coughs into his tissue. “I wasn’t the one to involve the press. I don’t care what the public thinks. All I cared about was the promise you broke to me. I gave you something, I gave you information in exchange for your word, and that led to you saving a life. You owed me.”

“Maybe.” Chad wrung his hands together. “Maybe I did owe you.”

“Then why didn’t you visit?”

“I thought it was a bad idea—”

“But why?” Vincent slid his head closer on the pillow.

“You’re a serial killer. You murdered—”

“Romeo Knight was a serial killer. You loved him. You still love him.”

Chad looked away. “You know nothing about Romeo.”

“Were you afraid I would’ve reminded you of him? Did you think whatever we talked about in Wiltknot would’ve brought up memories of your time together in the farmhouse? I won’t lie, I found you and him fascinating. Maybe if I’d have kept one of the girls alive long enough I would’ve manipulated her like Romeo did you.”

“He didn’t manipulate me.”

“Oh, Chad, for someone who thinks himself so clever you can be shockingly naïve.”

Chad pushed back in his chair. “If you’ve just brought me in here to talk about Romeo, then I’m done.”

“I brought you in here for four words.”

“Four words.” Chad cracked his jaw. “I remember.”

“Want to hear them?”

“Yes.”

Vincent smiled. “I didn’t kill Harriet.”

Chad stared at him blankly. Vincent’s smile spread until the edges of his mouth cracked and bled.

“That’s it? Those are the four words?” Chad asked. “The ones that will bring about my downfall?”

Vincent hummed. “They are.”

“I already suspected you hadn’t killed her.”

“Because you’re such a clever detective I thought you might,” Vincent scrunched his nose. “But now you know for certain. I didn’t kill Harriet. It wasn’t me.”

“Then who did?”

“Not my area of expertise.”

“Why would you admit to killing her when you didn’t?”

Vincent sighed. “I didn’t want to bring the other killer’s fun to an end. It’s us against you, the light against the dark, and I thought why not let them go free. I hoped after one, they would’ve got a taste for more. It can be quite addicting.”

“How did you know about the tattoo?”

“Eileen told me.”

Chad blinked. “What?”

“Eileen, Harriet’s mother, wrote to me. She told me things, things like … how she fell off her bike at fourteen and needed an operation. How Harriet had been so looking forward to them bringing sheep onto the farm. How she loved to sing. How her and her sister had been arguing over a boy, Gavin, and that boy, after she’d tracked him down years later, had told her about a dolphin tattoo on her daughter’s ankle.”

“But you knew what it looked like—”

“I did. Eileen sketched me a picture in one of her letters. Gavin had a matching one in the same place that Harriet had done for him. Romantic, don’t you think?”

“Eileen sent you letters?”

Vincent nodded. “Yes, don’t you remember me telling you I get lots of letters? There’s few I reply to, Tate just stood out to me, but Eileen kept sending them despite my lack of response. I think she found it therapeutic

telling me about Harriet, trying to appeal to my human side. I burned the letters after I read them of course. I don't need sentiment—from what I've seen it makes people weak and easy to manipulate."

Chad squeezed his temples. "I get that you're angry at me, but why drag Lucy and James into this?"

"Because if I was a betting man, I'd bet on one of them. The jealous love rival or the obsessed grieving dad. I saw the posters about James, you know, all those years ago, the ones Lucy and Harriet's father made, the ones warning about the pedophile in the police force. I don't know who killed Harriet, but that was never the point of all this."

"You wanted to get to me."

"Yes. I set the board. I brought in the players. But it's you that's been rolling the dice."

"More riddles. We're just puppets being made to dance on your strings."

Vincent closed his eyes. "I like that comparison."

"Lucy came up with it."

"But what happens when the puppeteer can no longer hold you up?"

Chad shook his head.

"You all fall." Vincent smiled with his eyes closed. "It was nice seeing you again, Chad."

"The feeling isn't mutual."

"I wouldn't imagine it would be. Now on your way out, tell the doctor no more visitors. I want to die in peace."

Chad got to his feet. "No can do."

"Why not?"

"There's one more person waiting to see you, Vincent, and I know more than most, she won't take no for an answer."

Vincent's eyes snapped open. He bared his teeth, gritting them together until his whole body shook. "I don't want to see *her*."

"Tough." Ally said from the doorway. "I'm going to watch you die and I'm going to enjoy it. Those were the words you said to me once and how I've longed for the day I could say them back."

She turned her body, and gestured for Chad to leave.

Chad caught her hand and squeezed it as he passed her.

Chapter Nineteen

Chad waited outside Vincent's room.

The doctor and nurses went in and out, but Ally remained by Vincent's side.

Chad slipped his phone from his pocket and typed out a message to Romeo to let him know he was okay. He received a one word reply of 'good' followed by another message asking if Vincent had said anything.

He didn't kill Harriet.

That much was obvious x

The door opened, and Chad looked up from his phone. Ally walked over and sat down on the seat beside him. She placed her hand on Chad's knee and squeezed.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you look like shit," she said.

"Thanks."

"When was the last time you slept?"

"I've been sleeping, just not well."

Ally reached for his face, hesitated for a moment, then brushed her thumb underneath Chad's eye. "Doctor Blake." She nodded. "I recommend him. He'll sort you out."

"I don't need to take—"

"It's not a weakness you know, asking for help."

Chad pressed his lips together. "Keeley helps me."

"Doctor Blake helps me." Ally replied. "Words can only do so much."

She pressed her thumb to the slug of black beneath Chad's eye, then lowered her hand to her lap.

Ally's smile was small. "I think tonight will be the best sleep I've had in years."

"Is Vincent…?" Chad asked.

"Yes. The doctor called it. The devil left this world at 4:42."

"Want to get out of here, grab a coffee?"

She shook her head sadly. "I'm going to follow him down to the morgue and watch as they zip him into a body bag."

"I'm sorry," Chad whispered.

"For what?"

Chad waved a flippant hand at the door. "For him. For what he did."

Ally stilled. “You worked it out?”

“Yes.”

“He isn’t your fault, and you don’t ever need to apologize for him. I’m the lucky one. I escaped, the others … well, you know about the others.” She caught Chad’s eye. “Are you upset I didn’t tell you?”

He shook his head. “If I could’ve kept what happened to me with Romeo a secret, I would’ve.”

“I know.”

“Why become a police officer? Why stay in Bardhum?”

“I wanted to make a difference, I wanted to catch and cage killers like him, and have done. As for why stay in Bardhum? I didn’t. I left with my parents, but I came back. This place is my home, and I wanted to retire here, but then I heard about you.”

“Everyone’s heard about me.”

“I found it so admirable that you were determined to carry on being a detective, but after everything that happened with Romeo you couldn’t get a job.”

“No station wanted me.”

“I wanted you in Bardhum. I came out of retirement, begged the DI to put in a good word for you and get you a job. You got kidnapped by a serial killer while doing your duty and serving the public, and everyone was prepared to cast you out.” She shook her head. “It was unacceptable. I had my parents after I escaped Vincent, but you had no one. The whole country turned its back on you, but I knew I could help.”

Chad lowered his gaze. “You have. You’ve done so much for me, Ally.”

“We’ve both been through shit at the hands of monsters, and we’ve both come through it. We’re the same, you and I, and I’m sorry I’ve blocked you out the last few weeks. But my monster was pulling you into his game and there was nothing I could do about it. If it wasn’t for me getting you a job in Bardhum, you would’ve never had to deal with Vincent Whitehall.”

“None of this was your fault.”

“Maybe if I told you from the start you wouldn’t have visited him.”

Chad bit his lip. “I still would have. To save Shawn, I would have.”

“What did he say to you in there?”

“Not much.”

“Chad…”

He sighed. “He told me he didn’t kill Harriet.”

Ally snorted. “It’s funny. He said the same to me. I didn’t kill Harriet. Those were his last words to me. Trust him to leave this world with more questions than answers.”

“But what if he didn’t kill her?”

“He admitted it.”

“I know, but what if, Ally?” Chad twisted his body to face her. “He told detectives he killed her in his van—”

“He probably did.”

“But he didn’t kill you.”

Ally took a deep breath. “No. He apprehended me. Tied my wrists and gagged me. Drove me back to his house and locked me in a bedroom, but I am one out of ten victims, Chad. The last one. He might’ve wanted to try something new … he might’ve grown lax with over-confidence. I managed to cut my wrists free on a broken bottle, and I escaped through the window.”

“The room he locked you in, were there signs the other girls had been there?”

Ally frowned. “If there were, I didn’t look for them. I wanted to get out.”

The door to Vincent’s room opened on the doctor, still grim-faced.

He nodded towards Ally. “We’re ready to take him down.”

“Good.” She got to her feet, and held out a hand to Chad. “Will you come with me?”

“Of course.”

Ally gave him a watery smile as she slotted her fingers through Chad’s.

True to her word, Ally stayed and watched Vincent be transferred to the morgue, and true to Chad’s word, he stayed, silently observing Vincent being tagged, and zipped into a black body bag.

“I wish you could’ve had this, too,” Ally whispered.

Chad frowned. “Had what?”

“Romeo’s body laid out on a slab.”

Chad’s gut tightened. He couldn’t imagine anything worse than seeing Romeo dead, being zipped up with no compassion.

“Sometimes I wish his body would wash up.” Ally said. “Give you … this moment.”

She squeezed his hand tight.

“He’s gone.” Chad said, speaking past the lump in his throat.

“I know, but you’re owed a body.”

“I don’t want one.”

Ally sighed. “Does your offer of a coffee still stand?”

“Of course.” Chad replied, pulling on her hand. He led her over to the door. Ally shot one last glance back at Vincent, then she dropped Chad’s hand and led the way.

****

Four hours after Vincent was pronounced dead, Superintendent Peter Watts addressed the press outside St. John’s hospital. His suit was immaculate, his hair neatly swept, and his eyes were bright and round with a practiced sincerity. James Poole stood beside him, disheveled, with his head bowed as Peter offered his sympathy to the Hastings family and informed the baying mob that they’d tried for two weeks to find out what happened to Harriet’s remains, but their attempts had been thwarted by Vincent’s failing health.

Chad didn’t get the invite to attend—there was no need to present a united front with Vincent dead.

The brief statement made by the superintendent had been playing on every news channel for the past twelve hours, repeated with commentary from body language experts. According to them, Peter was strained yet resilient, but James was crushed by the lack of a result.

“I didn’t kill Harriet.”

Romeo repeated Vincent’s words, rubbing his chin as he gazed out the window. Chad looked, too, but not even the magpies hopped around the muddy field—it lay barren and empty.

“Those were the four words he thought would cause you the most harm.”

“You were right.” Chad said. “He wanted to protect whoever the real killer is, hoped they’d get a taste for murder and go off on a spree.”

“Who knows, maybe they did.”

“Maybe,” Chad collapsed back onto the sofa. “Maybe not. Maybe they did it the once and didn’t again—”

“How anyone can stop at one is beyond me.”

“Some murders are accidental, some are heat of the moment.”

Romeo shrugged.

“So all this, this *game*… Vincent’s revenge was to have us fail and leave me with an unsolved case?”

“You didn’t fail.”

“And I quote, ‘Officers working with Vincent failed to get a location in the lead up to his death, devastating the Hastings family.’”

“Not your fault,” Romeo said firmly.

“I know, but that’s what’s being written,” he pointed at the TV, the superintendent and James were making their exit pursued by shouts and camera flashes. “That’s what they’re saying on the news.”

“Well, they don’t know the truth, do they, and you’re not to take notice of anything written or spoken about you.”

Chad widened his eyes. He saluted. “Yes, sir.”

“I’m serious, Chad. The press, the public, they’re toxic.”

“I know that firsthand, remember Holly Stevenson and her smear campaign against me?”

Romeo made an unhappy noise, still gazing out the window. “That’s ongoing.”

“Huh?”

“She moved to America, has a blog, several social media accounts.”

“This,” he gestured at the screen, “isn’t going to be pleasant, but I’ve had worse, and with you by my side…”

“In private,” Romeo didn’t mask his bitterness well enough, “never in public.”

“That’s the way it has to be.”

Romeo continued to frown at the window.

“What’s wrong?” Chad asked, struggling to sit up.

“I don’t know,” Romeo’s brow folded. “The magpies aren’t eating their seeds.”

Chad leaned up just enough to spy the full bird feeders, rocking on their posts in the slight wind. He rolled his eyes, slumping back into the sofa.

“Try a different seed mix.”

“I’ve been throwing them this one since I started feeding them.”

Chad nodded. “Exactly … maybe they’re bored of it.”

“Maybe,” Romeo said in a tone that suggested he didn’t agree.

“Why are you more bothered about the magpies then Vincent and his deathbed revelation?”

“Vincent not killing Harriet isn’t a surprise, but the magpies off their food…”

“I’m sure they’re fine.”

“And I am bothered about Vincent. Him … dying seems pretty unclimactic to me.” Romeo raised his eyebrow. “Are you sure he was dead?”

“He was definitely dead.”

Chad shuddered.

Romeo’s questioning eyebrow was joined by his other one.

He stared at Chad, waiting.

“It’s nothing. Ally just made a comment about how she wishes I could have that moment with you … that closure. I couldn’t imagine anything worse than you dead.”

“I can.”

“What?”

“You dead.”

Chad grabbed a pillow and hit Romeo’s arm. “Sappy bastard.”

“I always wondered why Ally had an unhealthy obsession with you. Now I know.”

“It’s not an unhealthy obsession. We’re friends … she sees herself in me I think.”

“Kindred spirits.”

“Something like that.”

Chad grabbed Romeo’s hand, and tugged until he gave up vigil on the birdfeeders and dropped onto the cushion beside him.

“They’re probably not hungry.”

“They’re always hungry,” Romeo huffed. “Maybe they got fed up with Mercutio’s ugly face.”

Chad poked him. “You did not just call Merc ugly.”

Merc gazed up at them from his bed. One of Peter Rabbit’s ears had disappeared, and a cloud of plush stuffing poked out of the hole.

“I did.”

“Look at his face and say it.” Chad challenged.

Romeo glanced at Merc, then away again.

“I can’t,” he sighed.

“Knew it,” Chad laughed, pressing into Romeo’s side. “Knew you’d love him eventually.”

“It is not love. I’m fond of him, and you’re right, he doesn’t have an ugly face.”

“Do you feel guilty for saying that?”

“Not in the slightest.”

Chad snorted and dug his phone from his pocket as it vibrated against him. Josh’s name flashed onscreen, no doubt about to celebrate Vincent’s death and demand Chad return to work as soon as possible.

Chad’s smile fell as he stared at Josh’s name. Vincent had assumed he’d be responsible for Chad’s downfall, but it was Josh who stood on the cusp, about to begin chipping away at the foundations of his and Romeo’s life.

“You going to answer that or what?” Romeo asked.

“No.” Chad said, placing his phone on his knee.

The call went to voicemail.

He’d listen to Josh’s message later—but Josh didn’t leave one, he called again, and again.

“Chad…”

“He must just be eager to talk about Vincent’s death.”

Romeo’s eyes were dark and searching. “Then why not answer?”

“In case it’s not the reason.”

The call ran to voicemail, then Josh dialed again. Chad chewed on his lip, staring down at Josh’s name until his phone stopped vibrating. He tensed, waiting for Josh to ring again, but he didn’t.

“I’ll call him back later,” Chad said, forcing cheer into his voice.

“Sure…” Romeo said, unimpressed.

Chad jumped at his phone ringing again, no longer Josh, but Ally tried to get through.

“Answer it.” Romeo said, slipping off the sofa. He stood up, crossed his arms, and looked down at Chad. “For god’s sake, Chad, just answer it.”

Chad squeezed his eyes shut and answered the call. “Hey, Ally—”

“Josh has been trying to get through to you. He’s with the DI and Faye. They’ve been called to James’s house. He’s dead, Chad. Gunshot wound.”

“Self-inflicted?”

“No. The neighbor was at the scene, tried to treat James where he was gunned down in his doorway, but it was pointblank to the face. She didn’t see who’d done it, but she heard James’s shouting, heard the gunshot and came over to investigate. She took down the plate. Josh told me the vehicle leaving the scene belongs to Lucy Hastings.”

Chad met Romeo’s gaze. “Fuck.”

“Josh is in a panic, he seems to think you could be in danger, said you’d been investigating both Lucy and James. What the hell is going on?”

“Fuck,” Romeo muttered, moving away. He stepped out into the hallway and peered through the small spyhole in the door.

“Chad! Are you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” he said, climbing to his feet on stiff legs to follow Romeo. He peered through the spyhole, too. “And so is Lucy.”

“What?”

“She’s driving up the road. I can see her red truck.”

“I didn’t kill Harriet.” Ally hissed. “Those were Vincent’s words, he said to me, he said them to you.”

“And he said them to Lucy *and* to James.” Chad’s eyes widened. “Vincent set the board, he brought in the players, but it was me rolling the dice.”

Lucy’s truck wheels scraped against the concrete as she slammed her foot on the brake. She flung her door open, not bothering to shut it as she climbed out with the gun clutched to her chest.

“You need to hide,” Ally said. Her voice pitched with desperation. “You need to hide now.”

Romeo gripped Chad by the arm and yanked him away from the door. He lost his grip on the phone. Ally shouted his name, but Romeo didn’t give him a chance to catch it. It clattered to the floor.

“Wait—”

The window exploded. A shard ripped open Chad’s chin as Romeo dragged him through the house. Merc barked at the door, but one whistle from Romeo and he bounded towards the kitchen.

“Vincent told me he didn’t do it,” Lucy shouted, “He told me the police made him confess to Harriet’s murder. He didn’t kill her. James did. James had gotten away with it for far too long, but not anymore.”

“Out the back,” Romeo growled, pushing Chad at the door.

“What the hell are you going to do?”

“Grab her from behind as she goes after you.”

“Are you mad!”

Romeo flexed his arm. “I’ll subdue her.”

“She’s got a goddamn gun.”

The front door swung open.

“Now, Chad,” Romeo growled, giving him a shove. “Out.”

“But—”

“Out.”

Chad shot Romeo one last look, crouched down behind the table, out of sight of the door. He didn’t hear Lucy inside, he didn’t hear much of anything until he was outside, rounding the corner of the house.

Lucy stood waiting.

“Rule one of shooting rats, scare them in the direction you want them to go.”

“Lucy…” Chad held up his hands.

Merc appeared at his side, growling as his hair stood on end.

“Listen to me,” Chad tried. “I spoke to Vincent, too. He told me he didn’t do it—”

“The difference is you knew that from the beginning. I found out at the end. All that time you were looking at ways of pinning it on me, protecting James.”

“No,” Chad shook his head. “I was after the truth.”

“And what was the truth?”

“I don’t know, but what I do know is Vincent was playing us. We were his puppets, and we were dancing on his strings. Just like you said. Your mom, she wrote to him. She told him things about Harriet, like how she’d fallen off her bike at fourteen, how she was really excited about having sheep on the farm, she even told him about the tattoo.”

“My mother didn’t know about Harriet’s tattoo.”

“She did. Years later, she spoke to Gavin, he told her about it, he even showed her his matching one. That’s how Vincent knew. He never saw it

himself."

"Then who killed my sister?"

"I don't know," Chad pressed his hand to his heart. "But I swear, I'll do all in my power to find out. It'll be easier once we go public with this."

"We?"

"Yes. We can still find out what happened to your sister."

Lucy's eyes tracked the ground. "It's too late for that."

"It's not too late."

"I don't need you, Chad, I've killed the only person it could've possibly been, and you either want to protect that bastard or … you believed him over me."

"No—"

"You believed him over my own sister, too."

"That's not true."

"And that, in my eyes, makes you as bad as him." Lucy lifted the gun. It didn't shake in her grasp. "You always stick together, the police, and that means you should die together, too."

"Lucy," Chad shook his head. "Think of your family."

"I am."

She pulled the trigger.

Chad gritted his teeth as he was body slammed to the dirt. He twisted onto his back, finding Romeo beside him, rocking back and forth as he clutched his arm.

"God damn it," Romeo snarled.

Blood dripped through his fingers and ran down his arm.

"Romeo?" Chad breathed. His eyes were wide, fixed on Romeo's bloody arm.

"Oh, my god," Lucy gasped staggering back.

She held the gun up again. This time it trembled. Chad put himself between Romeo and the muzzle despite Romeo attempting to shove him away.

Lucy pulled the trigger.

The gun misfired.

Lucy gasped again, hurrying back a few more steps as she fumbled with a cartridge, pulling it from her jeans. She slotted it into the chamber before snapping the gun shut.

Chad was on his feet, moving on autopilot as Lucy tried to take aim.

"Chad!" Romeo shouted, but he darted from his reach.

Chad grabbed the gun, too, not letting Lucy point it towards him or Romeo, it ended up between them.

Their feet slipped in the mud.

Lucy's eyes were wide, and a tear ran down her cheek. Chad felt one on his own face, hot as it trailed over his cool skin and clung to the edge of his jaw.

"You really shouldn't have done that."

The second she'd seen Romeo— it could only ever end one way. Lucy's bottom lip shook as she tried to pull the gun from Chad's grip, but he didn't let go. He was close enough to her that he could see the terror in her eyes, growing as his expression lost all emotion.

She'd hurt Romeo.

"You're … a detective."

Blood had soaked into her coat, straining the blue a dark grey.

Chad could see it on her throat and cheek too, speckled flakes like a spray had dried on her skin. He knew it was more likely James's blood than Romeo's, but just the thought of Romeo's blood.

Romeo, Romeo, Romeo.

The bright red of it filling the gaps of Romeo's fingers while he tried to cover the wound.

It made Chad dizzy.

Chad could smell Romeo's blood in the air. It made his heart pound, his veins fizzle and his mind fill with angry static.

She knew Romeo was alive. She'd seen him. She'd hurt him.

"The detective comes second."

Lucy had her forefinger hooked around the trigger, but she wasn't applying pressure with the gun pressed between them. Chad shoved the gun at her. It knocked her chin, her teeth clicked. The muzzle slid beneath, pressing into her soft flesh. Her eyes grew impossibly wide.

"I'm sorry." Chad squeezed his hand over hers, crushing her finger into teasing the trigger.

"I'm sorry," he whispered again, "this is my fault, I know it is, but Romeo will always come first."

Chad wrapped his free arm around Lucy's back, stopping her from escaping, then squeezed his fingers down on hers and closed his eyes.

Chapter Twenty

Blood filled the air.

The smell and the taste infected Chad's every breath.

It ran down his face, soaking into the top of his t-shirt.

The feel of it made his skin itch.

His eyes stayed shut, and he kept up his mantra of sorry even though he couldn't hear himself and Lucy could no longer hear him, too. His shoulders were up, so tense a fierce ache grew a fire in his muscles.

The gunshot had deafened him, leaving behind a loud ringing. Chad was thankful for it, without the ringing he would've heard other sounds, soft wet ones, a pitter-patter of falling blood and the heavier dull thud of Lucy hitting the ground.

Chad didn't hear it, but he felt Lucy fall from vibrations through the concrete and the sudden sunlight on his face. It was warm, but her blood was hot, and sticky in his hair.

He'd killed her.

He told himself he had to, and maybe Chad believed it, but the detective didn't.

The detective was in a state of shock at what he'd done.

He was supposed to protect the public, not blow them apart.

"Chad!"

The heavily distorted voice belonged to Romeo. He sounded far away, muffled beneath the ringing and under an ocean of white noise.

But it was Romeo, and he was calling for Chad.

He shuffled to face away from Lucy before opening his eyes and looking at Romeo on his knees. Romeo's hand clutched his bicep, stemming the flow of blood, but it didn't gush, it trickled over his fingers.

His lips moved with the shape of Chad's name, but it took longer for the sound to penetrate through the ringing, and even longer for Chad to understand. Romeo's eyes were wide, wider than Chad had ever seen, and for the briefest of seconds Chad was disappointed they weren't darker, and full of hunger for him.

It was Romeo's fantasy, Chad killing, but the reality didn't match. Instead of exciting Romeo, he looked stricken. Shuffling closer on his

knees, he abandoned clutching his wounded arm, and reached a hand out for Chad.

Chad didn't know whether Romeo wanted him to pull him up, or Romeo planned to pull him down, but he didn't take his hand.

"Don't touch me."

He hadn't meant for the words to leave him sounding harsh and cold, but he suspected from Romeo's flinch they had been. Romeo didn't lower his hand, but his fingers twitched, dropping blood from their tips. He said Chad's name again, but it didn't match the movement of his mouth. His name registered in Chad's brain delayed and slowed down. Chad looked at Romeo's injured arm. Three dark puncture wounds leaked blood down his bicep.

"Chad … it's okay. Just come here."

There was a war raging in Chad's head to the soundtrack of a ringing gunshot, but both detective and Chad agreed on one thing, it wasn't okay.

"Please, Chad."

Romeo's eyebrows flexed. He looked desperate, still reaching for Chad with his bloodied hand. His knees had sunk into the dirt, and Merc pressed close to his side. Merc's tail didn't wag. He looked like he was shivering.

"She would've killed us."

And yes, Chad knew that, too—the detective knew it, but the detective would've accepted that fate. He had when he put his body between Romeo and the gun. The detective chose death.

They were damned after all for what they'd been doing, condemned to eternal suffering after they died, but Lucy had been innocent. Before she'd met Chad, she'd been innocent, but Chad had twisted her untrusting nature, made her volatile, then it only took four words from a monster. James Poole was dead. Lucy Hastings was dead. It was Chad's fault, and the detective hated him for it, the detective kept him frozen in place, looking down at Romeo.

Romeo's eyes darted, focusing somewhere in the distance. There was noise, it warped, and whined, and it made Romeo gasp and crowd closer on his knees. Chad backed away a few steps, until his heels hit something solid.

"Listen to me, Chad. She was going to kill us—"

"I could've apprehended her. I could've got the gun from her."

They both knew it was true.

Romeo stopped reaching, and curled his fingers into his t-shirt, twisting the fabric covering his heart. “You did it for me.”

Chad shook his head. “I did it for *us*.”

“Us.” Romeo agreed. He nodded, never looking away from Chad. “Because it’s us, it’s us against everyone else.”

“Chad and Romeo,” Chad whispered.

“That’s right.”

The whining in the distance grew louder, Chad could follow the rhythm of it, it wailed with lower and higher notes in a sequence he recognized.

They were sirens, police sirens.

“Chad,” Romeo reached for him again.

“Don’t touch me.”

Romeo’s face folded in on itself. His eyes were wet, and his hand shook, but he’d misunderstood.

Chad tried again.

“You *can’t* touch me.”

Romeo frowned and lowered his hand.

“They’ll swab me for blood,” he said. “They’ll take it from my clothes, and my shoes. None of it can be yours. You have to get inside the house, Romeo, you have to hide upstairs, you *have* to fix your arm.”

Romeo covered the dark holes in his bicep again. “I will.”

“Promise?”

“I promise,” Romeo said. “I’ll be fine, but—”

“And I will be, too. We have to fix this. We have to make *this* worth it.”

Romeo started crawling towards the back of the house, glancing back at Chad every few feet, until he rounded the corner where Chad couldn’t see him. Merc followed him with his tail tucked between his back legs.

Then it was just him.

Him and Lucy, he amended because dead or not she was still there.

The back of his feet were touching part of her. Her legs, he imagined, but he didn’t turn around to look. Romeo’s blood soaked into the field, blending in with the dirt. It swallowed any evidence of him being there, and

the scuff mark in the ground, Chad's aching and dirty shoulder made it look like he'd dived out of the way, not been saved by Romeo.

He reached into his pocket for his keys, then tossed them to the dirt.

It didn't take long for the police cars to race up the track. The ringing in Chad's head subsided, but everything continued to sound like it was underwater, most tones lower in pitch, but a few higher, like the shout of his name that cut into him.

He turned towards it. He didn't glance down at Lucy on the ground, but he could see her at the edge of his vision, the vibrant color red glistening in the sun. Josh crashed into him, sending him back a few steps. He gripped Chad by his arms, shaking him slightly before letting go and looking at his hands.

"Shit. Holy fuck," Josh looked at him again. "Are you hurt, Chad, *are you hurt*?"

"No," Chad said, and his voice buzzed in his ears. When he spoke, he couldn't hear anything else, just his own lies as they left his lips, "I tried to get the gun off of her, and I don't know what happened, it went off."

Liar the detective screamed.

He winced. Josh bit his lip.

Chad didn't look down at Lucy, but he watched Josh's face as he did, it twisted with a grimace, then he was back to looking at Chad with big blue eyes.

"You did what you had to," Josh said. He nodded, until Chad copied him. "It's okay."

"It's not okay."

Josh glanced at Lucy again. "She was going to kill you, right?"

"Right."

"It was her or you, and you chose you."

You should've chosen her.

A shrill sound escaped Chad's throat.

Josh started walking towards him, arm out at his side like a barrier. "She killed James. She came here to kill you, too. She would've killed you."

Chad frowned when he realized he was walking. His feet were moving, and Josh's arm was at his back, not touching, but there to guide

Chad away from Lucy, from the flashing police cars, and all the officers milling about, taking in the scene.

Lucy would've killed them. She'd tried to kill them, but she hadn't and from the moment she struggled to re-load the gun, Chad was culpable for her death. He could've stopped her, detained her, but it wouldn't have been enough to protect him and Romeo.

"James," he managed to croak.

Josh stopped, and Chad did, too. They were far enough around the house Chad could no longer see Lucy, and the scene being cordoned off.

"We got a call from his neighbor. She told officers she'd heard arguing, a woman with James, but she hadn't gone out to look who, not until she heard the shot. She didn't see Lucy, but she managed to capture her numberplate. I tried to call you."

"I know."

"I ended up calling Ally when I couldn't get through … don't be mad, I know you and her aren't—"

"We're fine," Chad said dismissively. "We sorted things."

"Thank God because she should be here soon. She called me back, said you'd told her Lucy was at your house, then she said she heard a gunshot…" Josh shook his head. "Fucking hell, Chad."

"Lucy shot the window in the front door. I dropped the phone."

Josh made a move like he was about to hug Chad, but hesitated, and instead pincer gripped Chad's shoulder with his thumb and forefinger. "I really want to hug you, but…"

"The blood," Chad finished. "We can't risk any contamination for the case."

"Case? What are you on about? It was self-defense." Josh spun around to face the back door. "Shit, Merc?"

"He's okay. He's inside."

Josh stepped away. He used the hem of his shirt to open the backdoor.

"What are you doing?" Chad asked.

"Merc!" Josh called out, and sure enough, the slow patter of feet on the stone kitchen floor followed. Merc stuck his head out the door. He was still shivering. Josh crouched down. "There you are bud," Josh said. "I would pat you, but—ya know."

"Blood," Chad finished. "So much blood."

Josh looked up at him. “I think we need to find you somewhere to sit, you’re in shock.”

“I’m fine—

“Chad!” Josh gasped. He widened his eyes at Merc’s side. Blood had stained his fur. “Did she hurt him?”

“No. It’s … It’s not Merc’s blood. It’s not mine either.”

He’d been pressed against Romeo. It was Romeo’s blood. Chad scrunched his eyes shut at the images of Romeo clutching his arm, and the blood leaking through his fingers.

His bicep had been twitching.

Chad didn’t know how bad the injury was, he didn’t know if Romeo was upstairs unconscious.

“Chad?”

He opened his eyes. Josh was frowning at him.

“Who’s blood—”

“He was out here with me. It’s hers. I locked him back in the house when I heard the sirens.”

“Okay,” Josh said, nodding. He got to his feet, before closing the back door with his elbow. “You stay with us,” he directed at Merc. “I’ll even let you ride shotgun. Fuck, I didn’t mean…”

Chad shook his head. “I can’t leave.”

“We’re going to walk around the other side of the house, and we’re going to sit you down in my car.”

“Josh,” Chad gestured to himself. The blood on his face had dried, and pinched his skin as it cracked, but his t-shirt was still wet.

“I know,” Josh shot him a sad smile. “I’ll put a protective sheet over the back seat.”

“And the floor.” Chad added. “We need to do this by the book.”

“And the floor,” Josh agreed with another sad smile. “We’ll calm you down, then—”

“Drive me to the station. My clothes need to be bagged up, swabs need to taken … and fingerprints. My fingerprints. They’ll be on the gun—”

“Yes, yes,” Josh interrupted, “but first we need you checked out by the doctor.”

“I told you I’m not hurt.”

“You’re acting pretty spacey. It’s scaring me if I’m honest.”

“Sorry.”

“No,” Josh sighed. “Don’t be sorry, Chad. I don’t know how to help you that’s all. Come on.”

Chad let Josh lead him around the side of the house. He counted five police cars, no longer screeching, but their blue lights continued to flash. The DI approached, thought better of gripping Chad’s shoulder, and instead did a once over with his eyes.

“Are you—”

“I’m not hurt,” Chad told him. “None of this is mine.”

“Ally’s here,” Josh said, pointing in the direction of her car. Someone shouted for the DI. He groaned before telling them he’d be right back.

Ally hurried over to them, and hugged Chad tight.

“You can’t,” Chad said, not embracing her back. “The blood.”

“I don’t give a shit about the blood,” she let go, “unless any of it’s yours.”

“It’s not.”

“Good,” she nodded. “That’s good. You need to sit down.”

“I’m fine.”

“You look about ready to pass out.”

Josh opened the back door of his car. “I did try to tell him.” He kneeled on the backseat, and reached over to grab a plastic sheet.

“You need to sit,” Ally told Chad.

“We’re all ready for you,” Josh said, patting the plastic on the seat.

Chad walked over, and side-saddled the seat leaving his legs on the ground. He tipped forward, catching his head in his hands. He brushed his bloodied hands through his blood slick hair. There wasn’t enough to drip down his face, but he could feel it collecting on his sideburns, irritating the fine hairs. Most of the blood had sprayed his face and ran down the side of his neck, soaking his t-shirt.

Ally rubbed the back of his neck. Josh crowded in close, blocking him from the sight of the other officers. Merc sat on the ground in front of them, occasionally swiping his tail back and forth with nerves. Chad didn’t know how long they stayed like that. His shoulders throbbed, his neck ached, and the scent of blood had his stomach rolling.

“I really fucked up this time.”

Ally tried to lift his head, but when he refused, she crouched down to look at him. “You didn’t.”

“I played right into Vincent’s hands. He knew I’d look, he knew I’d investigate, and I did, I investigated Lucy. I grew suspicious of her, and she knew it. She felt let down, trapped, angry and then it only took four words from his twisted mouth.”

“Four words?” Josh asked.

“I didn’t kill Harriet.” Ally said. “That’s what he said to Chad, that’s what he said to Lucy, if James was still alive, I imagine he would’ve told us Vincent had said the same to him, too.”

“He admitted it,” Josh whispered. “He actually—”

“It doesn’t matter.” Ally snapped.

“What do you mean it doesn’t matter?”

“He only said that to stir up trouble, who knows whether he was telling the truth or not. He wanted a reaction. Three out of four didn’t take the bait, but it only takes one.”

“Wait…” Josh’s shoes scuffed the ground as he pressed himself closer. “What do you mean out of *four*?”

“I meant three.” Ally said. “Two out of three, but it only takes one, and that was Lucy.”

Chad exhaled at the ground. “I pushed her towards it.”

“She was a grown assed woman, she made her choice. She chose to believe Vincent and then she chose to gun down James and come here to do the same to you. She was weak.”

Chad lifted his head. “Don’t start this again. You said that about Tate, too.”

“Well, he was. They both were. They let a serial killer into their heads.”

“So did I!”

“This isn’t about Romeo—”

“I’m not talking about Romeo, I’m talking about Vincent. I should’ve kept him out. I shouldn’t have gone to see him again. You tried to tell me, Ally, but I didn’t listen and I thought … I thought I was smarter than him.”

She looked away.

“And now James and Lucy are dead.”

“It’s not your fault.”

Chad ran his fingers though his hair again. It was no longer slick, but tacky.

The DI strolled over, and Josh backed off enough to include him in their human box around Chad. He pressed his lips together in a grim line, lowering his gaze to his shoes. “Are you ready to go down to the station?”

Ally stood up. “He needs to be checked over by a doctor.”

The DI nodded.

“I need to get out of these clothes as soon as possible. I need to shower, I need to wash my hair,” Chad swallowed. “I need to get the smell of blood out of my nose. That’s what I *need*, Ally, not a doctor,”

“Okay,” she said softly.

Chad looked up at the house. Most of all, he needed to know Romeo was all right. He needed to know he’d be there when he got back.

If he got back.

Chapter Twenty-One

Chad felt like a criminal.

Correction, he *was* a criminal, but he had to convince whoever stepped through the doors to the interview room, he wasn't.

They'd taken his fingerprints, swabbed his hands, the side of his face, and his neck, but they hadn't taken any photographs.

He hadn't been arrested.

Not yet.

And not at all if Chad could convince officers of his version of events.

They'd taken his clothes, let him shower, then handed him some worn down grey joggers and a grey sweatshirt. He could see his skin through the threadbare knees of his jogger, and the sleeves of the sweatshirt were torn, and mishapen, as if the previous wearer had chewed them. The clothes smelled terrible with a strong scent of stale body odor.

He'd been asked to hand over his shoes and socks, too, and had been given a mismatched pair of sports socks that scratched like a scouring pad.

Chad didn't bounce his leg on the floor, or fiddle with his fingers in his lap. He didn't pinch the top of his joggers or chew the sleeves. Keeley's visits had taught him to hide his nervous tells and he sat slumped in his chair—not too slumped, that screamed over confidence—but not ram rod straight, and certainly not rocking back and forth like he'd witnessed so many suspects do over the years.

Chad sat relaxed in the chair like it was a relief to finally sit down, and rest his back against something solid, because it was.

His eyes were on the mirror on the wall. He didn't know if anyone stood in the boxroom on the other side of it, but he stared anyway.

When the door opened, it was the DI who stepped into the room, laptop tucked under his arm, and holding a cup of coffee. He smiled at Chad, and placed the coffee down on the table. Chad recognized the brand printed on the side of the takeaway cup. He glanced at it questioningly until the DI pushed it closer.

"Josh insisted," the DI snorted softly. "Said you couldn't stand the instant coffee we sell here."

“Thanks,” Chad said, wrapping both hands around the cup. He exhaled as it warmed his palms.

“Are you feeling any better?”

“A bit,” Chad admitted. “The shower helped.”

It was basic, hidden away in a holding cell. It trickled out warm water, just enough for Chad to sweep the small hand soap he’d been given over his skin. He’d scrubbed the bar over his hair, rinsing out the blood that couldn’t be seen with the naked eye.

“Good,” The DI said, taking his seat opposite Chad. “That’s good.”

He set up the laptop, then reached into his pocket.

“Josh also got one of the officers to bring you this.” He revealed Chad’s phone. The screen protector had smashed from where he’d dropped it, but he could still see the waiting message from *Frank*.

He managed not to snatch the phone from the DI’s fingers. Barely.

“Josh said he tried to message Frank back, but he didn’t know your passcode.”

Chad held out his hand. The DI hesitated before passing it to him.

“No doubt he’s heard the news … you might want to tell him you’re all right.”

Chad opened Romeo’s message.

I promise I’m okay. Come home to me.

Chad exhaled a shaky breath, and blinked back the prickle of tears in his eyes. He couldn’t break down, not yet.

I will x

“Done?” the DI asked.

Chad swiped away a stubborn tear from his lash line. “Done. I’ve told him I’m okay.”

“Good.”

Chad glanced at the still open door while pocketing his phone.

“He’ll be along soon,” the DI said.

“He?”

“The superintendent.”

Chad’s toes curled. He nodded, before sipping his coffee. It helped rid him of the irony tang of blood still on his tongue, and he breathed deep, hoping to push the scent out of his nose once and for all.

It lingered, though, and he had to mentally stop his mind rebelling and taking him back to the *moment*.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

The superintendent's abrupt tone suggested he was anything but sorry. He sat down beside the DI, rested his elbows on the table, and steepled his fingers beneath his chin. Chad looked over to him and didn't look away from the stare he received.

"I'm superintendent Peter Watts and this is Detective Inspector—"

"Chad is well aware of who we are," the DI interrupted.

"Still. The formalities need to be performed."

"He's not a suspect in a crime."

"Excuse me," the superintendent shot a pointed look at the DI, "but a woman was found murdered on his property."

The DI glared back. "*Murdered* would imply Chad had a choice in what happened. She was found dead. We're here to ask Chad what happened in the lead up to her death and why she died. If recent events have affected your abilities to perform your job—"

"Don't you dare. I outrank you, remember that, and I'm personally involved in the case that led to the events of today."

"Maybe you're too close to this."

"And maybe you are too close to Chad," the superintendent snapped back.

The DI sighed. "Chad. Tell us what happened."

Chad took a deep breath, then told them. He told them Ally called him. How he'd gone to the front door and seen Lucy park outside. How she shot out the window, and he'd fled to the kitchen. How he heard the front door bang, and thought she was inside the house.

"What were you planning?" the superintendent asked. "To come up behind her?"

Chad shook his head. "No. I had my keys. I was going to drive away."

"We found Chad's keys in the dirt."

Peter flicked his hand at Chad to continue.

"She wasn't in the house. She was waiting outside for me. She fired, I managed to move out of the way, then she went to fire again, but nothing happened."

“She’d already fired the other shot, remember?” Peter asked. “You said she shot in the window of your front door.”

“The window of Chad’s front door had been broken,” the DI said, tapping away on his laptop.

“So at this point, Lucy was not a threat. Both shots had been fired.”

Chad gaped. “She had a gun—”

“An unloaded gun.”

“I was on my side in the dirt. She’d just tried to kill me. I saw her grab a cartridge from her jeans. She was loading the gun. She was going to shoot again. I had to do something, so I got to my feet, and I…”

It had been so easy retelling what happened minus Romeo, up until this part. This part choked him. The lies stuck into his throat, cutting deep as he tried to force them out.

“Do you need a minute, Chad?” the DI asked.

“No.” He swallowed. “I want to get it all out while it’s fresh in my mind. I grabbed the gun. It was muddy, we slipped. We struggled. The gun was between us, and it went off.”

The DI looked away from his laptop. “Killing Lucy.”

“Yes.”

“And what happened next?”

“I … I could hear the sirens in the distance. I shut Merc in the house.”

“Merc?” Peter asked.

“My dog.”

“You never mentioned anything about a dog.”

Chad bit the inside of his cheek. “He was there with me, and I shut him in the house when I heard the cars coming. I didn’t want him to get knocked down.”

“Interesting name.”

“What?” Chad asked.

Peter cocked his head. “The dog’s name. Merc. What’s it short for?”

“It’s not short for anything.”

“Are you sure it’s not Mercutio?”

“What the hell does the dog’s name have to do with anything?” the DI hissed.

Peter shrugged. “Curious, that’s all.”

“The police arrived. Josh was there, he led me around the other side of the house.”

“Out of sight of any other officer…” Peter said.

“What are you implying?” the DI asked.

“I’m not implying anything, only stating fact.”

Chad gestured to the DI. “You know the rest.”

“Can you think of any reason why Lucy would want to harm you or James?”

“She was angry and upset.”

The DI nodded, poised to type something. “Because you hadn’t got the result she wanted. You didn’t find Harriet.”

Chad swallowed. “I’m sure she felt angry and upset about that, too, but it wasn’t the reason she wanted to hurt us. Vincent told her something.”

“What?” the DI asked.

“He told her he didn’t kill her sister,” Peter answered.

Chad frowned. “How did you—”

“He said the same thing to James, and he marched straight out of that room not believing a word. He called me about it from outside the hospital and I told him Vincent was just messing with him, and he should go home.”

“Vincent said the same to me,” Chad whispered.

“Yet, you didn’t say anything to James or me. You kept it quiet.”

“I didn’t think it was…”

“Necessary? Important?”

The DI shook his head, glancing at Peter. “Why would Lucy have believed him? Vincent confessed.”

“I don’t know. Maybe Chad can enlighten us.”

Chad’s curled toes began to cramp. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

“You asked for the case files,” the DI murmured.

“I … I didn’t know anything about the Whitehall murders. Harriet’s file was incomplete. So much of it had been blacked out, and there were inconsistencies in Vincent’s recollection.”

“What inconsistencies?” Peter asked.

“With the others he recalled details. Specific details, but not with Harriet. He was vague, that and with the lack of remains…”

“It made you think someone else might have been responsible for her death. It made you think that you were better than the officers of thirty years prior and could find the *real* killer or even worse, you suspected a cover up by those officers.”

“I wanted to know the truth.”

Peter stabbed his finger down on the table. “You had it. Vincent killed her. He chopped her into little pieces like he did the others, then he hid her around Bardhum—”

“Then why hasn’t she been found? Why was he vague in his details?”

“He wasn’t vague.”

“He could only describe her from what had been written on her missing persons posters.”

Peter leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “Missing rib. Tattooed ankle.”

“Wait,” Chad squeezed his eyes shut. “He didn’t know that at the time.”

“Of course he did. He found out about the rib for himself when he cut her up, and he must’ve seen her dolphin tattoo, too. James told me.”

“No. Vincent found out because the letters Eileen wrote to him.”

The DI leaned across the desk. “Letters? What letters?”

“She sent them to Vincent while he was in Wiltknot.”

“Where are they now?” the DI asked.

“He burned them.”

Peter tipped his head back, and barked a laugh. “How convenient.”

“He burned all his letters.”

The DI nodded. “He did. I remember he destroyed Tate’s—”

“When are you going to wake up?” Peter snapped in the DI’s direction. “He’s not a team player. He’s not special. He’s out for personal glory and will invent whatever he has to in the pursuit of it.”

“That’s not true,” Chad said. “I’ve only ever wanted to protect people and keep them safe from the monsters.”

“Did you keep James safe, Chad? Did you stop Lucy from doing something monstrous?”

“I didn’t know she would go after James. If I’d have known—”

“You would’ve done nothing,” Peter said. “You hated James.”

“I didn’t hate him—”

Peter turned to the DI. “Did you know he accused James of being a pedophile?”

“I didn’t—”

“He wanted to know how James knew Harriet. Even went to some disturbing means to get James to admit to an inappropriate relationship with her,” Peter chuckled darkly, “but the girl sang in the choir at his daughter’s funeral. They went to the same church. That was how they knew each other.”

“He was known to pick her up after school, and leave her gifts.”

“Let me guess … you learned that from Harriet’s father. He made his daughter make a statement—a vicious load of lies. He ran a smear campaign against James, tried to get him kicked out of the police, tried to get him forced out of Bardhum by a baying mob. James went through hell, and then he got accused of Harriet’s murder. It was only when Vincent confessed, he finally moved on and then thirty years later you bring it all up again.”

“It’s inappropriate for a twenty-eight-year-old married detective to be giving a seventeen-year-old girl rides home. It was wrong for him to be parking with her in secluded spots.”

Peter slammed his hand down on the table. “Nothing sexual happened between them. They talked. The friendship was ill advised, but not illegal.”

Chad chewed the inside of his cheek. “I wanted to fill in the gaps.”

“Why? That wasn’t your job. Your job was to meet with Vincent. To chaperone him around the area in the hope of jogging his failing memory.”

“It was a game to him.”

Peter nodded. “Yeah. We knew that was a strong possibility, just a game, one last chance for Vincent to take the spotlight and remind everyone he was once someone to be feared, but I didn’t think you’d be playing on his side. From the beginning you were against James when you should’ve been with him.”

“I messed up.”

The DI caught his face in his hand. “Christ, Chad.”

“Lucy thought I’d turned against her. She thought I was looking for a way of pinning her sister’s murder on her.” Chad rubbed his sore cheek. “And when Vincent told her he didn’t kill Harriet, she went after the only other person she thought could have.”

“You have blood on your hands.”

“I know.”

“Do you remember the oath?”

“The oath?”

Peter nodded. “The office of constable oath.”

“Every officer has to swear the oath when they join.”

“But do you remember it.”

Chad shook his head. “Not word for word—”

“It talks about fairness, integrity, diligence and impartiality. All things you’ve failed at. It talks about keeping the peace and preventing all offenses against people and property. You failed that, too. You failed, Chad. Your incompetence, your inability to follow orders and work with others has cost us two lives—”

The DI straightened. “You can’t blame Chad for—”

“I can and I do.”

“Lucy made the decision to go after James, hell, she went after Chad, too. You can’t pin this all on him to save your own skin.”

“My skin won’t be saved,” Peter gritted his teeth. “I’m not going to come back from this. My resignation is on my desk in Alborough, but I’ll be damned if I leave before making sure Chad resigns with me. If it was up to me, you’d do time for this, but I imagine you’ll avoid it, but if there’s even a slither of doubt in your version of events with Lucy, I’ll encourage the Hastings family to rip you apart in court.”

“Enough,” the DI growled.

“You aren’t coming back from this, Chad,” Peter said. “I swear I won’t let you. You’re not a detective. Not from this day forward. You’re nothing.”

Chad lowered his head. He couldn’t stop his leg from bouncing, or his fingers from fidgeting in his lap.

“I’m … not nothing.”

Peter got to his feet. “I expect to hear of your resignation by the end of the day.” He tilted his head toward the DI and tipped his head in a nod

Then he left, slamming the door behind him.

“Fucking hell, Chad.” The DI gripped his hair as he released a long breath. “I don’t really know what to say.”

“You don’t need to say anything … can you help me write it out?”

“Write what out?”

“My resignation,” he revealed his hands from under the table, trembling and bloody from where he’d pulled at his hangnails. “I can’t stop shaking.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Are you sure you don't want to watch something else?"

Chad turned his head to reply, never taking his gaze off the TV screen. The DI had gone, resignation letter in hand, with a downbeat expression, and left Chad to settle his thoughts in the quiet. The laptops buzzed around him, and he'd collapsed at his own desk, logged into his laptop, and found a live-steam of the news.

"No. I'm good."

Ally sighed and stepped up behind him. She squeezed his shoulder. "You're not fine, and I doubt watching that is making you feel any better."

No. The news reports from outside his house didn't make him feel any better. His eyes burned from his intense glare, and he'd picked a big hole in the thin fabric over his knees.

"At least lean back," Ally said, trying to ease him into the chair.

Chad shook his head. "I can't."

Romeo was inside the house, and on the footage, he saw one of the forensic officers stepping through his front door. "Why do they even need to go inside? Lucy…" he swallowed. "She didn't even go in the house. It happened outside—"

"You know why," Ally said softly. "They're doing it by the book, documenting both your and Lucy's movements. Cases like this … self-defense cases have to be solid. You told the DI and the superintendent what happened and the evidence inside the house and in that field will back you up."

"I still don't like them in my house."

"I know."

"How long until they leave?"

Ally sighed again. "You know this, too. It can be over twenty-four hours for forensics to document and record everything, then they'll remove the evidence and … and Lucy."

The camera zoomed in on the white tent set up over Lucy's body. Forensic officers were going in and out, one armed with a camera.

"Did you…" Chad sucked in his bottom lip, and bit down before he could continue. He took a deep breath. "Did you see her?"

Josh had driven him and Merc to the station while Ally had remained behind.

"Yes…"

Chad turned to face her, but kept his gaze low, specifically on her hand still on his shoulder. She squeezed.

"And I know … whatever happened … Lucy didn't give you a choice."

"What if I did?"

"What?"

"What if I did have a choice."

Ally's hold on him tightened. "The other choice was death, Chad. She'd already killed James."

Just like that, the footage on the laptop switched from Chad's home to James's and the police cars parked outside. The white tent had been set up right on James's doorstep.

"She was there to kill you," Ally exhaled hard. "It was her or you."

Detective Fuller could've disarmed her. He could've restrained her. But Chad…

He rolled his fingertips against his forehead, but it didn't help with the ache. Pain throbbed behind his eyes, and he watched the footage through a squint.

"I just want them out of my house."

The incident door screeched as it opened. Chad assumed the DI had returned after dropping Chad's resignation on his superior's desk. Chad had signed. The DI had signed. It had been wordless, and neither of them had been able to meet the other's eye.

"Hey," Josh said quietly.

Chad stilled at the gentle pad of feet. Four of them. He reached for Merc without looking, and found his hand thoroughly licked by a warm tongue. When Chad breathed in deep, his nose twitched at the scent of clean soap.

He looked down at Merc. "You … you washed him?"

Josh nodded. "Couldn't have him wandering around with blood all __"

Ally elbowed Josh, and his mouth snapped shut.

Josh cleared his throat, before trying again. “He needed a wash, so I took him back to mine.” He looked down fondly at Merc. “He loves the shower.”

“You put him in the shower?”

“Yeah. He was biting the spray and getting quite angry about it.”

Chad’s lips twitched with a smile, but it didn’t last.

“I brought you this, too.” Josh threw a hoodie his way. “I thought you’d rather wear something of mine, than the clothes of a crimi—ouch!”

Ally eyeballed Josh with wide eyes.

“I just … you know, those clothes are uncomfortable, and they stink.”

“Thanks,” Chad said, gripping the bottom of the grey sweatshirt. He pulled it over his head and set it to one side. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Josh inhale sharply at the sight of his bare chest. Chad didn’t hurry to cover his scars like he once had, but he punched his arms into Josh’s hoodie, sighing at the soft material against his skin as he slipped it down.

“I didn’t think about bottoms.” Josh admitted. “But I’m a few sizes bigger than you, doubt I’d have anything that fit.”

“It’s okay,” Chad said. “I wouldn’t want my trousers falling down—that would take my bad day to a complete catastrophe.”

Josh didn’t know where to look, but Ally laughed darkly and rubbed her hand against Chad’s back. He leaned away from her touch.

“I’m not coming back from this.”

Ally stiffened. She shared a worried glance with Josh. “What do you mean?”

“This,” Chad gestured to the incident room, to each of their desks, then the DI’s office door. “It’s over.”

“It’s not,” Ally said. She moved to perch on Chad’s desk. “It wasn’t your—”

“I resigned.”

Josh took a step back. “What?”

“The DI won’t accept it,” Ally scoffed. “There’s no way he’ll bend to public pressure like that. He knows you—”

“He agreed it was for the best. And it’s not the public pressure he’s worried about. It is the internal pressure.”

“Internal pressure?” Josh asked.

“From other stations, and other officers.”

Ally shook her head. “You’re talking about the superintendent from Alborough.”

“My actions got a police officer killed.”

“Chad—”

“It’s true, Ally. I made Lucy suspicious of James. I broke her trust. If I’d … if I’d have handled this differently James would still be alive. Lucy would still be alive. I can’t come back from this, and the DI knows it.”

“This is bullshit.” Josh shook his head. “I don’t want you to leave.”

“It’s not all bad,” Chad attempted a smile. “I’ve got a business to fall back on. A dog finger licking service in the mall remember?”

“It’s not funny,” Josh said.

His blue eyes were hard and glassy. Chad couldn’t keep looking at them.

“The fall out for all this…” Chad took a deep breath. “It’s going to be huge. The press, the public, the police … I’m going to be enemy number one. Again. I don’t want you to be dragged into that,” he waved his hand between them without making eye contact, “either of you.”

Ally folded her arms. “What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying we were work friends, and now I no longer work with you, so…”

“You don’t want us to be friends.” Ally finished.

“It’s better if you’re not associated with me.”

Ally filled up on a deep breath. “Sometimes Josh irritates the hell out of me, and I want to clip him around the ear, but never in my life have I wanted to punch someone as much as I want to punch you now.” She turned to Josh. “You might have to hold me back.”

“Hold you back?” Josh huffed. “You can get in the damn line because I’m pulling back my swing to knock him the fuck out.”

Chad closed his eyes. He gripped the bottom of his seat and rocked forward and back. “I know what’s coming. It’s a storm gathering speed. I can practically see it on the horizon and hear it in my head, and I don’t want you two caught up in it. I don’t want either of you to be punished just for knowing me. I don’t want your names to be dragged through the mud, your lives to be ripped opened and spread as gossip in the papers, bricks to me thrown through your windows and people to spit at you in the street. I know how this goes, remember?”

“I don’t care,” Josh snapped. “I don’t care about any of that.”

“You should!”

“Well, I don’t!”

Ally slipped from the desk and pressed her hand to Josh’s chest. She forced him back a step.

“You are my friend,” Josh said fiercely, “and that’s not going to change. Nothing is going to change that, and I won’t let you push me away.”

“But—”

“No, Chad. If things are going to get as bad as you think they will, you’re going to need us. Both of us.”

Josh looked to Ally who nodded back.

“You don’t get rid of us that easy,” Josh finished.

Ally squeezed Chad’s shoulder again, but Josh went one better, giving Chad a bear hug from behind.

“I don’t deserve you guys.”

“Nonsense,” Ally snapped. “Now,” she pressed down the laptop lid despite Chad’s protest, “you need to get out of here.”

“I can’t go home yet.”

“No, you’re coming back to mine.”

“What?”

Ally raised an eyebrow. “You heard. You and that mutt.”

“He’s called Merc,” Josh said, affronted.

“Wasn’t talking about Merc.” Ally smiled. “But he’s invited, too.”

Chad shook his head. “I can’t go to yours.”

“Well, you sure as hell can’t go back to your place at the moment, and you can’t stay here.”

“What if—”

“I’ll tell the DI where you are in case he needs to ask you any more questions, but you need time to process everything, and staring at the news until your eyes bleed isn’t doing you any good.”

Josh reached down to pat Merc. “We’re ordering pizza, though.”

Ally narrowed her eyes. “Why? I’m a good cook?”

“And I’m sure during the blitz you were—ouch.”

Josh rubbed his side. “Again, woman?”

“Insult me you get a slap,” she pointed a finger at Chad. “Try to terminate our friendship and it’s a punch, understand?”

Chad nodded. “I understand.”

****

Chad didn’t sleep. Ally had retreated to her bedroom at midnight after complaining of a sore throat, leaving Chad and Josh in her living room. She’d told them several times there were spare beds made upstairs for them, but they didn’t leave the comfort of the sofas, and the flickering gas fire.

Before she left, she pressed a note into Chad’s palm with a number for Doctor Blake. He opened his mouth to protest, but one firm look and he backed down and slipped the phone number into Josh’s hoodie.

Despite the threatening notices on the door warning away cold callers with the promise of a vicious dog, Ally’s house had a homely feel. The sofas were deep and squidgy with blankets layered on them. Tall lamps in each corner gave the room a gentle glow, soothing Chad’s irritated eyes. His headache remained, though, throbbing as he watched the flickering fire Ally had left on.

Josh had sprawled over the adjacent sofa, burrowing into an array of faux fur blankets. Merc lay on top of him, dribbling onto Josh’s chest. They breathed in time with each other, except Josh had more of a wheeze to his breaths and Merc a soft growl.

Chad didn’t sleep.

He couldn’t.

For hours he lay staring at the fire until the sun started to rise and he couldn’t take waiting anymore.

Chad sat up, waking Merc from his slumber.

“It’s okay,” he whispered, as he crept into Ally’s hallway.

There were pictures of Ally and her husband’s wedding day on the walls. She’d worn a black wedding dress, and he’d worn a white suit. They both had huge smiles.

Chad whispered into the phone as he called himself a taxi. He knew Ally would have something to say about him sneaking off in the early hours, but he couldn’t wait any longer.

The need to text Romeo had almost been too much, but Chad didn’t want to risk him being discovered. Even on silent, he had visions of Romeo fumbling with his phone, dropping it on the floor, and being found upstairs by a suspicious officer.

The taxi ride passed in a blur, and Chad paid with his phone, then stepped out onto the dirt road. A police car was waiting. He greeted the officers, and they shot him grim smiles back. They pitied him. They pitied what had happened. It wouldn't last, though. As soon as the internal investigation into what went wrong started, they'd hate him. They'd all hate him.

"Is everything…" He gestured to the house. He couldn't say any more.

The officer in the driver's seat nodded. He sat up from his reclined position, and from the lack of focus in his gaze, messy hair, and the yawn he'd smothered with the back of his hand, Chad knew he'd been asleep.

"Yes," he smiled weakly. "The crime scene cleaner will be along later."

"Am I allowed back in the house?"

The officer nodded. "It's as you left it. We're going to stay out here a few hours, keep the press from trespassing on your property. There's been some drones flying overhead, just thought I'd warn you."

Chad glanced at the sky. "Thanks."

He walked on, not too quick, not too slow. No doubt the officers were watching him in their rear-view mirror. Chad didn't want to give anything away.

Blue police tape flapped in the wind as he approached. It had been tied around posts, cordoning off the area, but they had fallen into the mud. Lucy's truck had been recovered, leaving behind marks on the drive where she'd slammed on the brakes. The white tent had been taken away. Lucy was gone, but still, Chad didn't let his gaze linger on *that* side of the house.

One of the officers had duct taped carboard on the smashed window, keeping out the breeze. It was thoughtful, but whoever it was would curse themselves for showing Chad any compassion in a few days' time. Cop killers were considered the worst of the worst, and although Chad hadn't pulled the trigger, he'd pushed Lucy in James's direction.

He eased the door open, slowly stepping inside. The lights were all off. They had to be to avoid suspicion. Chad flicked the hall light on. He didn't speak Romeo's name as he climbed the stairs. Chad didn't know why he was tiptoeing, or why his heart was in his throat.

He got to his and Romeo's bedroom door. It was shut. Chad hesitated before whispering against it, "It's me."

He opened the door, and reached to switch on the light. Romeo was on the bed, white t-shirt flecked with dried blood. Chad's eyes snapped to the bandage around his arm, crisp white, no blood seeped through.

The relief almost floored him.

"Romeo?" Chad stepped into the room. "Your arm."

He wanted to rush to him, take his arm in his hands and inspect the damage, but something was *off*.

Romeo didn't raise his head. "It's fine. A few scratches."

"They were holes."

"I got the biggest bits out with some tweezers, cleaned it up."

Chad grimaced. He moved to the bed, and reached for Romeo, but found his hand pushed away. His thumping heart picked up pace.

"Romeo—"

"They didn't come upstairs." Romeo said. "I hid under the bed just in case, but they didn't come up."

"Good," Chad fidgeted, not sure how to handle *this* Romeo. "I was so scared they'd find you."

"They didn't."

Romeo's shoulders were up. His neck muscles were pulled taut, and he kept flexing his hands into fists. Chad tried to reach for him again, but Romeo shuffled up the bed until he leaned against the bedrest.

"How bad was it?" he asked.

Chad took a deep breath, perched on the edge of the bed, then told Romeo everything. Romeo worked his jaw back and forth as he listened, staring at the ceiling. The lack of eye contact unnerved Chad to the point he stopped recounting everything that had happened at the station and fell silent. He could hear his heart pounding, and wondered if Romeo heard it, too.

They didn't speak. The minutes went by impossibly slowly. Chad found a stray thread from the duvet and wrapped it around his fingers until it cut his circulation. The tip of his finger turned blue.

"I'm sorry." Romeo said.

Chad startled, and the thread snapped.

"For what?" He frowned. "You don't need to—"

“I thought I could keep you safe from Vincent. I thought we could beat him.” He cracked his knuckles. “Christ, Chad, she … she could’ve killed you.”

“You pushed me out the way.”

“Barely. I told you to leave the house, and she was waiting. I led you straight to her, and him, Vincent, I sent you back to him, too.”

“I’m okay.”

“Well, I’m not.”

Chad glanced at the bandage. “I know.”

Romeo lifted his arm. “I’m not talking about this. They’ve taken the detective from you,” He closed his eyes. “I’ve taken him from you.”

“No. I chose you,” Chad whispered, “I chose us.”

“You shouldn’t have had to choose. You were supposed to have both. I didn’t want to take that away from you.”

“You didn’t,” Chad promised. “Did you know police officers have to take an oath? Doesn’t matter the rank or the position, we all have to take it, the same one, and I remember such pride when I spoke the words. I meant them. I’d honor those words until I died. I broke that oath a long time ago.”

He crawled over before straddling Romeo’s legs. Romeo refused to look at him. He kept his hands fisted at his side while he tensed and relaxed his jaw.

“Wanting you was wrong, selfish, and it’s against everything the detective stood for, but I told myself it could work, I could do both. I could break the law and upkeep it at the same time. I could be honorable in public but dishonorable in private. I could be … two different people, but yesterday, I killed someone for us.”

“She had a gun,” Romeo said through gritted teeth. His eyes met Chad’s for a split second before he closed them again. “You had no choice.”

“I did have a choice. *The detective*, he could’ve taken the gun from her, restrained her, waited for the police to arrive, but she would’ve told everyone about you—about us. We’d have lost everything, and maybe that part of me thought it was just, a fitting end to us, but the other part, the part that is *yours* couldn’t accept that. I chose to kill her to protect what we have. I didn’t just kill Lucy. I killed that part of me, too.”

“You should never have been in that position,” Romeo snapped.

“But I was, and I regret a lot of what happened during these past two weeks, but I don’t regret that choice. I’ll never regret it, no matter how uncomfortable knowing what I did makes me feel.” He leaned over, and brushed his thumbs over Romeo’s cheeks as he cupped his face. “But please, don’t punish me for choosing you, for choosing us.”

“Punish you?” Romeo breathed. He opened his eyes. “I’m not—”

“You’re angry—”

“Not *at* you, Chad. I’m angry at myself, at Vincent, at Lucy, and I can’t do anything about them. They’re dead. But me…”

“You can only punish yourself by punishing me.”

“What?”

“When you saw me in the doorway just then, did you really want to look at the floor instead of at me? Did you really want to push me away instead of taking my hand? Did you really want to distance yourself from me by moving up the bed.”

“Rather than protect you from it, I pushed you deeper into his game. I thought we could outwit him, I thought we could prove he didn’t kill Harriet.”

“And you were right, he didn’t—”

“But at what cost? I’ve taken something from you that I can’t give back.”

“I don’t want it back! I choose you, Romeo Knight.” Chad scrunched his fingers into Romeo’s t-shirt. “And I don’t blame you for anything that happened. It’s only because of you I’m still here right now, and not bagged and tagged in some morgue.”

“Don’t—”

“You didn’t hurt me—but you are hurting me now. This,” he ran his gaze up and down Romeo, “you’re holding yourself back from me. It hurts.”

“I’m not trying to hurt you—I’m just angry at myself, at the situation, and I’ve got no idea how to make this right.”

“The next few days, weeks, months,” Chad shook his head, “I don’t know what’s going to happen, but it’s going to be bad. You can’t do this.”

“Do what?”

“Close yourself off from me. Pull away. Leave me on my own. I need you, Romeo, if I’m going to survive this, I *need* you.”

“Survive… What do you mean survive?”

“It was just—”

“You’re not allowed to die,” Romeo growled softly. His eyes darkened, and his hands flew to Chad’s thighs. He gripped hard enough to bruise, but Chad sighed in relief that Romeo was finally touching him, no matter how rough. “Promise me.”

“Promise you what?” Chad asked.

“You won’t die. I couldn’t bear it.”

Chad shook his head. “Everyone has to die.”

Romeo sat up, flinging Chad back. Strong arms caught him before he hit the mattress. Romeo pulled him in, pinning Chad to his chest. “Not for a long, long time,” he said close to Chad’s lips. “And it’s together. We die together.”

Chad leaned in to kiss Romeo’s mouth.

Romeo moved away. “Promise me when the time comes, it’ll be together?”

“I promise,” Chad said, “And you … you need to promise me something to.”

“What?”

“Promise you’ll stop holding back. Stop … *this*, because you are not distant, you are not cold to me, you don’t turn from my kiss, or shuffle up the bed to get away from me. You said you are not sure whether you can trust that other part with me yet, but what about this part, what about *Romeo*, because it’s not the monster that’s hurting me right now, it’s not him that’s scaring me, it’s you.”

Romeo’s arms coiled around Chad, holding him on his lap. “I’m sorry,” he breathed. His eyebrows dipped and twitched. “Just … tell me what you need and I’ll do it.”

“I need you to tell me you love me. I need you to tell me everything is going to be okay and to believe it yourself. For you to be happy that I chose us, like I always said I would.”

Romeo nodded, almost frantically, before pressing his lips to Chad’s. He didn’t tell Chad anything, not with words, but with his harsh grip and his brutal kiss.

They’d lost against Vincent Whitehall, but they were far from down and out.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chad stared down at his murky reflection. He breathed out, and the top of his coffee rippled. Keeley waited, with patient kind eyes, she waited for him to speak.

The session so far had been one-word answers to her questions.

She prompted him to say more with nods, but he couldn't.

There were no words.

His throat had gone dry.

Merc lay on the floor by Keeley's feet, chomping his rawhide bone. He kept stopping to glance at Chad. Even Merc could tell he was only just holding it together. Josh and Ally had rallied around him like they said they would. Romeo had stopped punishing himself by putting distance between them. He'd been more overwhelming than normal, and when a car pulled up outside their house to throw a brick through the window, Chad had to anchor himself to Romeo to stop him flying outside and chasing down the driver.

"It might help if you talk," Keeley tried. "If you can't tell me in words per say, you could tell me in emotions and we'll go from there."

He didn't drink his coffee, but it cooled in his hands.

"Exhausted." Chad managed.

Keeley watched as he touched his face. The circles beneath his eyes were dark, and his usually smooth jaw had grown patchy stubble he'd forgotten to shave off that morning.

"You're not sleeping," she said softly.

"I fall asleep, but my dreams wake me up."

"Dreams about?"

"Marc, Tate, Vincent, Lucy," Chad shook his head. "It's like my subconscious is attacking me, it wants to stop me from sleeping. It wants to punish me."

"You speak about your subconscious like it's a different entity."

"It's the detective," Chad snorted to himself. "He doesn't want to go quietly."

"The detective," Keeley frowned. "You mean…"

"Myself," Chad clarified. "That part of me... the one that's supposed to be selfless and protect the public and uphold the law. That part I failed."

“You did what you had to do to survive—”

Chad held up his hand to stop her. “I don’t want to talk about Lucy.”

Keeley nodded.

“Cornered.” Chad said.

“Cornered?” Keeley tilted her head.

“You said I should say what I feel like right now. I feel cornered.”

“It’s understandable. The press attention should ease … eventually.”

“Have you read what they’re saying about me on social media?”

“No.” Keeley said firmly. “You shouldn’t read that either. It’s toxic.”

“And the news reports,” he sighed, “and the papers.”

Chad put his coffee down on the side table.

“Holly Stevenson is enjoying herself.” Chad swallowed back his bitterness the best he could. “She lives in LA now, has a big apartment and lots of journalist friends. She has a channel, and a podcast, and she is spewing out hate for me like you couldn’t believe.”

Keeley bit her lip. “Can’t the police do something—”

“The police,” Chad chuckled without humor. “They won’t help me. Superintendent Peter Watts has made sure of that. My professional reputation is in tatters.”

It was supposed to be an internal enquiry on a need-to-know basis, but of course Peter had spread details around Alborough, and they’d spread to other areas, including Bardhum. Josh had wanted to keep Chad out of the loop, but Ally said Chad had a right to know what was being said about him.

“If I was on fire, the police would stand back and warm their hands on me.”

“Chad…”

“It’s true.”

“It might feel like that—”

“It’s *true*.”

Keeley looked away. “I’m really worried about you.”

“That’s sweet.”

“I think you might need some extra … help.”

“That’s why I’m here,” he snorted. “I didn’t want to come today.”

“I’m glad you changed your mind.”

“I didn’t. Frank convinced me.”

Keeley lowered her gaze. “When I mentioned extra help. I meant medication. I’m a therapist. I can’t prescribe you anything, but maybe your doctor—”

“I don’t need anything.”

“Not even something to help you sleep?”

He shook his head.

Keeley slumped. “Okay.”

She noted something down.

“Are Josh, Ally and Frank being supportive?”

Chad thought of them and immediately felt lighter. They cleared the dark fog in his head and let his words come easier.

“They’re great. Josh and Ally, I couldn’t wish for better friends, and Frank … he keeps me sane. I love him, and he loves me, and no one can touch that.”

Keeley sighed. For the first time during the session, she smiled. “Keep them close.”

“I will.”

“Have you given any thought to what you want to do now you’re no longer a detective?”

Chad shook his head. “Not yet, it’s still quite raw.”

“It’s only been a few weeks since—

“Two weeks and five days,” Chad said. “Do you remember what I told you Vincent said to me when I first visited him?”

Keeley’s mouth opened. She glanced at her notebook. “I probably wrote—”

“He said if I denied him his time, he’d poison mine.” Chad snorted down at his hands. “Two weeks and five days is how long it took for the world to turn on me.”

“The world isn’t against you, Chad.”

“It feels like it.”

“The bullies of the world just shout the loudest, but they are by no means the majority.”

“I only know three people that are on my side.”

“Four.” Keeley’s gaze cut him. It softened. “And one very loveable dog.”

Merc looked up at her, smacked his lips together, then resumed gnawing his treat.

"Four people and one Merc," Chad sighed. He closed his eyes. "Sorry, it's just…Vincent swore he'd poison my life, and I feel it, I feel the effects of it. I'm tired. I'm unmotivated. I'm depressed. I feel … unwell. And I don't know how to make it better. I worry that I'll just make the people around me sick, too."

"Stop that," Keeley interrupted. "You've been through so much, Chad. It's only been two weeks and five days since … since everything changed for you. It'll take time. The bullies and the trolls will lose interest, and you'll be able to move on and start a new chapter. Don't let Vincent Whitehall win. Don't be one of his victims."

"I won't be." He nodded to himself. "Everything is just a lot right now."

"It's okay to take a break."

"That's what Frank keeps saying."

Keeley smiled again. "He's a wise man."

"Taking a break feels kind of like running away."

"What's wrong with running away?"

Chad frowned.

Keeley shrugged. "If you were running away from a lion would that be considered cowardly?"

"No."

"No," she agreed. "Fighting that lion head on while you're tired and sick would be considered foolish. Get away for a while. Turn off the TV, switch off your phone, and be you, Chad. Come back stronger. Come back healthy … that's if you want to come back at all."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't have to fight the lion. This place … it holds so many bad memories. You don't have to stay here. You can let go. You can move on."

"People will think—"

"Why do you care so much what people think? Why do you value their opinions over your own happiness? You have this idea that your worth only comes from others—without their approval, you're worthless. It's an unhealthy mindset that you need to work on."

"I know."

Merc finished his rawhide and sat up. He eyeballed Keeley, begging for more.

"Greedy boy," she laughed.

"At least he took his time today." Chad said. He grabbed Merc's lead off the couch.

"Same time next week?" Keeley asked.

Chad nodded. He jangled Merc's chain, and he rushed to heel.

"Take care of yourself," Keeley said.

He smiled weakly. "I'm trying."

When he passed through reception, all eyes snapped to him. Pam shot him a smile, but it soon fell when someone tutted loudly. She ducked behind her reception desk, and tapped away on her laptop as he went by.

As soon as Chad was through the door he exhaled the breath he'd been holding. The cool air brushed around his neck and he shivered. Merc whined up at him.

"I'm okay," he said, but even to his own ears his voice was hollow. "Shall we go home?"

Merc wagged his tail.

Chad took a step off the curb, only to freeze at the truck racing towards him. Its brakes squealed, drawing more eyes. A red-faced Andrew jumped out. He rushed at Chad, gripped him by the biceps and flung him at the wall.

Chad's teeth clicked together. His biceps burned where Andrew still had hold of him, digging his fingers in until Chad was certain his skin would bruise.

"My mom's dead because of you!"

Chad didn't argue against Andrew's wrath. He didn't try and reason with him either.

"She wanted your help finding her sister, but she didn't want to involve you. She told me you'd already been through so much. She tried to protect you and you … you betrayed her."

Chad's gaze snapped to Andrew's. Fury reddened the white of Andrew's eyes.

"She told me what you did. She told me how you suspected her. It hurt her. You broke her."

Andrew eased Chad away from the wall just so he could shove him at it again. The back of Chad's head cracked against the brickwork. Merc growled.

"Shit!"

Chad glanced to the doorway he'd come through to find Pam, biting her lip.

"I'll call the police—"

"There's no point." Chad said.

"Admit it." Andrew said. "Admit it was your fault."

Chad swallowed, about to do just that, but a croaked voice cut in, and loosened Andrew's hold on Chad's arms.

"It wasn't Detective Fuller's fault."

Chad looked past Andrew to the red truck. The driver's door had been left open by Andrew when he flew across the carpark to confront Chad, but now when he looked, the back passenger door was open, too.

Michael Hastings sat on the seat, gaze glued to his grandson.

"It is!" Andrew sneered, bumping his nose to Chad's as he got in his face. "It was his fault. You shot my mother at point blank range."

"The gun went off as he tried to disarm her," Michael argued.

"I don't believe it—"

"The fault lies with Vincent Whitehall. It's always been him." Michael said. "He killed Harriet. He tortured my wife—your grandmother—for years and once she was dead, he started on Lucy. He messed with her head and she snapped. We all have a breaking point."

"Chad helped her get to it."

"But it was Vincent that made her act on it. Even now, with what you're doing, Vincent is still a shadow over our family. He's dead, but he still tortures us."

"I don't want Chad to get away with it."

"Do you really think he is?" Michael looked around.

So many people were watching, and Chad knew they wanted Andrew to keep going until he was unconscious. Bruised and bloody.

"He played his part in this," Michael said, pointing a finger at Chad. "And he'll be judged and punished in due course, as will all of us, but I won't have you attacking him in the street. You are better than that."

"I don't think I am," Andrew hissed, tightening his hold.

“You are. Your daughter knows it, your wife, your brother, too, and so did your mother. Let him go, Andrew.”

“Grandad—”

“Let him go.”

Andrew squeezed Chad’s arms until he winced, then released him. He stood back, looking Chad up and down. He opened his mouth, about to deliver some vile line, Chad could feel it, but Michael cut in again.

“Andrew … my flight…”

Andrew nodded, backing away. He eyed Chad as he inched back to his truck.

“You better hope I don’t see your face again,” Andrew said.

Chad stayed where he was against the wall. Merc stood in front of him, growling louder as Andrew retreated.

Andrew climbed back inside the truck, Michael gave Chad one last long look, one that seemed to keep stretching until he slammed his door shut. Chad watched them drive away, but waited until the audience they’d attracted had thinned before making his way to his car.

Merc clambered into his lap once they were inside. Chad’s hands were shaking so much he couldn’t get the key in the ignition, so he pressed back into his seat to wait out the adrenaline rush.

I didn’t kill Harriet.

Those were the four words that brought about Chad’s downfall, and although Vincent couldn’t have predicted what would transpire after he’d spoken to each of them, Chad knew whatever part of hell Vincent had been sent to, he’d be there smug despite his eternal damnation.

He’d delivered on his promise.

But still, Chad couldn’t help but wonder about Harriet Hastings, and as he took measured breaths while he tried to calm down, all he could think about was Michael’s words and the look that had lingered between them.

Why would he be sympathetic towards Chad when he was responsible for his daughter’s death?

What did he mean when he said they all had a breaking point?

How was *he* going to be judged and punished in the end?

Chad had focused his attention on Lucy and her fake whereabouts the night of her sister’s disappearance, he’d ignored Michael alone on the farm.

The farm Harriet was walking back to in the dark.

She'd just been with James—the man Michael was trying to keep her away from.

What if she had got back after all?

What if something had happened?

Chad frowned, thinking back to their first meeting.

'*There's no way you've found her.'*

How could he have been so sure they hadn't?

"Shit," Chad whispered. He adjusted his rearview mirror to see the road behind, but the truck was long gone. "His flight … he's going back to Italy."

And then it was Lucy's voice he heard in his head, telling Chad about how her dad had struggled to cope at the farm, and in Bardhum and had left for a job abroad only six months after Vincent's confession.

Even when visiting, he'd not wanted to stay on the farm, but had chosen a hotel close to Wiltknot. A knot tightened in Chad's gut, and he tugged his phone from his jeans, about to call the station, then he stopped.

They wouldn't believe him.

He was no longer a detective.

He was Chad, *just* Chad.

And his and Romeo's justice worked a little differently.

Epilogue

The sun emerged over the horizon as Chad drank his coffee. He'd woken breathless after another bout of dreams. Marc, Tate, Vincent, and Lucy had all been in them, a mishmash of moments his subconscious had thrown together with no true beginning or end.

Romeo had crushed him to his chest, murmured reassurances, hoping to help Chad drift off again, but he'd only succeeded in sending himself back to sleep.

Chad didn't mind.

Listening to Romeo snore while being pressed hard enough to him to feel his heart beating was far more peaceful than sleep ever could be, but he decided he'd take Ally's advice and call Doctor Blake.

Chad grew restless in bed, and had managed to escape Romeo's arms and trudge downstairs.

His head throbbed. His eyes were dry, and he sniffled, reaching for a tissue. He blew his nose as quietly as possible not to disturb Romeo above.

Merc stood at his side, drooling already as he waited for his bowl to be filled.

"It's a little early," Chad told him, but filled it anyway.

Merc dove his head in the bowl and started chomping. His collar jangled as it hit the bowl, and Chad thought of the gun, the click of the barrel closing, the snap of the trigger.

Chad left the kitchen to grab something from his coat. He returned, took a deep breath, then looked down at his ID card. A younger Chad looked up at him. One before Romeo. He used the same passport photo he had in Canster. The Chad in the picture was eager to prove himself, desperate even, the public's approval meant everything to him.

Not anymore.

He tugged open the cutlery drawer and grabbed a sharp pair of scissors.

Chad cut the card lengthways, slicing through his own throat, then he dropped the pieces in the trash bin and turned to the window.

He sighed, then frowned as the bird feeders caught his eye.

The rising sun glinted off them, dazzling Chad until he put down his coffee and moved to the pantry to grab the bird seed. He slipped on

Romeo's mud-covered boots and grabbed his reaper coat from the stair banister before trapsing outside to fill the feeders.

Merc followed after he'd finished his biscuits and proceeded to gobble up the escaping seeds that hit the ground.

"There," he said, glancing around the trees, but magpies didn't swarm him like they did Romeo. All was still and quiet. He sighed, and trudged his way back, whistling Merc to heel.

"That's a good look on you," Romeo said as Chad stepped inside the kitchen.

"I think you pull off the reaper better than I ever could."

Romeo snorted, then resumed scrolling through his phone. Chad slipped out of his boots, then passed Romeo to hang up his coat.

Romeo bit his lip, glancing up from Chad's phone.

"What is it?" Chad asked.

"I booked us a little getaway."

"We talked about this—in principle, it sounds great, but sneaking around a serial killer on a holiday will be more stressful than it is relaxing __"

"It's remote," Romeo said, passing the phone to Chad. "It comes with spectacular views."

"It's on a damn cliff top." Chad said, widening his eyes. He scrolled through the pictures of a huge double bed overlooking the sea. The living room had a log fire, and a corner sofa perfect for cuddling up on.

"They allow one well behaved dog," Romeo raised his eyebrow, "but Mercutio will have to do."

"Merc's perfectly behaved."

"I can see sunflower seeds between his teeth…"

"Romeo, I … I don't know," Chad said. He sat down at the table.

"You need a break," Romeo said. "We need a break from this," he gestured to the field. "A little time to reset, just be us. It's got private access to the beach, there's not another property for miles, and the key is in a lockbox attached to the house. It's perfect."

"It does sound good," Chad admitted.

And it did. It sounded too good to be true even, a break where he wouldn't have to acknowledge the world's hatred for him. He wouldn't wonder about how close Josh was getting to the truth, or think about how he

was going to pursue Michael, who Chad was convinced had something to do with Harriet's disappearance.

A week of just him, Romeo, and Merc.

"Let's do it," Chad said softly.

Romeo beamed. "Here's the plan. We fill the car with everything we need, check in, then won't leave the place until our week is up. No TV. No phones—"

"No magpies."

Romeo snorted. "No. No magpies," he looked out the window. "Not that there's any here. I don't know what's happened to them."

Chad scrolled through the pictures again. He allowed a smile.

"So … when are we going?"

Romeo looked back at him. He leaned down to kiss Chad on the head. "Friday."

"What would you have done if I'd have said no."

"Plan B was tying you up on the backseat."

"I'm glad it didn't come to that."

Romeo was about to reply, but paused at the sound from outside. The chuckle and chortle of magpies. He grinned, and pulled Chad from his chair. Romeo's arms surrounded him, and held on tight. "We're going to be okay."

"I know," Chad whispered. "I'm not sure what the magpies have to do with that, though."

"They bring us luck."

"More like headaches and the fear of losing an eye to their claws."

"Dramatic," Romeo said, bopping him on the nose.

Chad rolled his eyes. "Looks like the change of seed worked."

"I didn't change it," Romeo murmured. "Just needed your magic touch."

Chad watched the fluttering of wings out the window as Romeo kissed up his neck.

"How many are out there?" Romeo asked against his skin.

Chad sighed, and through half lidded eyes, managed to count them. "Six."

"Six." Romeo repeated, dragging his teeth against Chad's jaw.

Chad's eyes slid further shut at Romeo's caress, but a smudge of black opened them wide.

It swooped down.

The magpies cawed, and screamed, and beat their wings as they retreated to the trees, but one of the six didn't make it.

Romeo lifted his head, letting go of Chad as he rushed to the backdoor. He didn't bother with his boots, he stepped into the field, breaking out in a run.

Jet black wings stretched wide, and the bird took off, flying over the house and out of sight before Romeo could get to it.

Chad had caught glimpses of it before.

The predator that lurked in the shadows.

Romeo had told him he'd been imagining things.

Chad watched from the window as Romeo picked up the dead magpie. Its head flopped from one side to the other, neck broken. Romeo stretched out one of its wings, marveling at the flashes of blue and green as the sun reflected off the feathers.

It was beautiful. Chad didn't like the magpies. They were loud, and bold, but there was no mistaking the beauty they had or the hold they had over Romeo.

He spoke to them, and they spoke back.

Their effect on him was almost spiritual.

Chad didn't get it, but he didn't need to.

All he needed to know was they meant a lot to Romeo.

Romeo's mouth hung open, and his eyes were wide like he couldn't comprehend what had just happened, that something had been so brash to have taken one of them out right in front of him.

It lay dead in his hands—all he could do was manipulate its small body and watch as its neck jerked, tormenting himself. Chad could see Romeo breathing fast, the flashes of anguish on his stunned face. It bothered him to see it like that, dead and cooling fast in his hand.

Each roll of its neck made Chad's stomach churn.

"Enough!" Chad shouted as he rushed outside to join Romeo. "Enough, Romeo!"

He took the magpie from Romeo's hands. "You can't… There's nothing you can do."

Romeo glared over the house in the direction the *raven* had flown.

“It’s … it’s nature.” Chad said, not knowing what else to say. “Predators and prey. Life and death.”

“Life and death,” Romeo echoed back. His voice lacked all emotion. “There *were* six.”

“Yeah,” Chad agreed, studying the magpie in his hands. It was small and delicate, and its beady eyes were open and unseeing. “There *were* six…”

The End

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